

# PHILIPPINE ENGLISH

## LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

**Edited by**  
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# Introduction

## *Philippine English: Linguistic and literary perspectives*

Kingsley Bolton and Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista

### Encountering the Philippines

The unprepared foreign visitor to the Philippines is often astounded by the immediate encounter with this tropical society and the texture of a daily life that includes crowded and chaotic cities, heat and rain, music and dance, and friendly, hospitable, multi-tongued people in a nation with more than a hundred recognized indigenous languages. In the capital Manila (population twelve million), the street signs are in English; the disc jockey on the radio woos the station's listeners in dulcet American; the bookstores are full of English books (many penned by local writers); and the front pages of the major newspapers assail readers with headlines such as 'PNP Opposes Erap Confinement', '4 Pinoys Hurt in Ship Blast in Australia', and 'Local Bets Troop to Comelec'.

Although most Manileños only speak English to other Filipinos in such formal settings as the boardroom or the law court, and prefer to mix English into a hybrid vernacular of *Taglish* (Tagalog and English) with each other, the presence of an American-influenced variety of English permeates public and private life in an unusual and surprising fashion. The taxi driver may give you a nuanced account of local politics, the coffee shop waitress may discuss *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and the salesperson in a store may crack a joke in colloquial Philippine English (*Joke only!*) — interactions unlikely to be repeated in other Asian cities. Our foreign visitors may take this somehow for granted as they head to their business meeting, or in the case of tourists, head for their beach vacation. Or they may find time to consider and to ponder how it is that this predominantly Malay society, with its diaspora of overseas emigrés and workers, happened to become one of the largest English-speaking societies in the world.

As editors, we have been guided by two essential aims in compiling this volume on English in the Philippines. The first of these has been to produce a volume that would be of interest to an international audience, some of whom may be scholars with an extensive knowledge of Philippine linguistics and



literature, while others in this audience may have little previous knowledge in this area. The story of English in the Philippines is a compelling tale, and one that deserves international recognition, we would argue, involving as it does narratives of colonialism and postcolonialism, of hybrid language and literature, as well as contemporary histories of politics and globalization.

A second aim has been to publish a volume that would serve students and teachers in the Philippines who are interested in researching aspects of Philippine English, from both a linguistic and literary perspective. We therefore trust that this volume will not only serve as a record of previous research, but also as a starting point for future studies in this field, and will be of direct use to the local academic and educational community. For both audiences, however, it may be useful at this point to consider at least some of the sociolinguistic (i.e. historical, social, political, and linguistic) realities that have influenced the spread of the language here, not least because of the impact of historical, social, and political factors in shaping English language and literature in the Philippines.

### The sociolinguistic background

The Republic of the Philippines comprises 7,107 islands located close to the equator, south of the China mainland, east of Vietnam, and northeast of the Indonesian archipelago. For much of its existence as a geographical entity, the Philippines has owed its identity and borders to successive waves of colonialism, and the name *Felipinas* is said to have been coined in 1543 by the Spanish explorer Ruy de Villalobos in honor of Crown Prince Felipe (or Philip), later King Philip II of Spain (1556–98) (Quimpo, 2003). Ethnically and racially, the majority of Filipinos are considered Austronesian, having a kinship with similar populations in Indonesia and Malaysia, while there are over one hundred indigenous Austronesian languages spoken in the Philippines (McFarland, this volume). The most important indigenous ethnic groups include the Tagalogs on Luzon Island (the majority population in and around Manila), the Cebuanos (or ‘Visayans’) in the southern islands, and the Ilocanos from northern Luzon. Philippine society is also noticeably creolized, with significant groups of Philippine-Spanish, Philippine-Chinese, and even Philippine-American ‘mestizo’ groups in the community, particularly in the cities. McFerson comments that contemporary Filipinos are ‘virtually “a race of races”’, and that although essentially Malay in racial composition, ‘they also have Negrito, Indonesian, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Arab, European, and American “bloods”’ (2002: 15). The first colonial power to rule the Philippines was Spain, who governed the Philippines from Mexico from 1565 until 1898. During this period, Catholicism became strongly established throughout Philippine society, and today eighty percent of the

population claim to be Catholic. Despite this, various types of animistic and folk beliefs are still widely held, while there is also a substantial Muslim population in the south, in and around the island of Mindanao.

The Philippines was occupied and colonized by the US after the Philippine-American War of 1899–1902, which immediately followed the Spanish-American war, when Spain also lost control over Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam. The United States essentially maintained colonial control over the Philippines until 1946, at which time the Philippines became an independent nation (a third group of colonizers were in fact the Japanese, who took control of the islands during World War II, from 1941–1944). Since then, the American government has continued to exert a strong influence over Philippine politics, which during the Vietnam War led the United States to give prolonged support to Ferdinand Marcos, whose presidency from 1965–1986 became a dictatorship. After the fall of Marcos as a result of the ‘People Power’ movement in 1986, Philippine domestic politics has continued to dismay many observers. Even notionally reformist governments, such as those of Corazon Aquino (1986–92) and Fidel Ramos (1992–98), have proved unable to tackle the widespread corruption throughout many sectors of society.

Following Ramos, Joseph ‘Erap’ Estrada (1998–2001) was elected as a result of his popularity as a film actor, but was subsequently forced to step down and charged with ‘economic plunder’ in January 2001, when the current President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo took office. Politically, the Philippine democratic system is still far from stable, and national elections in the country are dogged by violence and electoral manipulation and fraud. Equally worrisome are the assassinations of over 800 left-wing politicians, social activists, and trade union leaders since Arroyo took power. In addition, so many journalists have also been murdered over the last decade that, by 2004, it was claimed that the Philippines was the second most dangerous location in the world for newsmen after Iraq (Mendoza, 2004).

Economically and socially, there are vast differences in wealth between the upper classes of Philippine society (‘the oligarchs’) and the lower classes of the cities and provinces (the *masa*, or ‘masses’), at a time when increasing numbers of the rural poor are migrating to the cities. Numerous economic reports have indicated that the development of the nation has lagged behind that of comparable Asian societies, such as Malaysia, Thailand, and South Korea. One of the major foreign exchange earners for the society continues to be the export of human labor (particularly female labor), and an estimated eight million Filipinos now work overseas, often in low-paid jobs, as domestic helpers (in Hong Kong), as nurses (in the US and UK), or, in the case of males, as engineers, technicians, and merchant seamen. In the words of a recent BBC report, ‘[w]ith high literacy rates (87%) and good English speaking ability, Filipinos are arguably the country’s greatest export’ (Jinkinson, 2003). For those who remain in the Philippines, the prospects for

domestic employment are usually bleak, unless they have the support of a well-off and well-connected family. To complete this somewhat dismal picture, mention might also be made of the frequency of natural and man-made catastrophes, ranging from such natural disasters as drought, earthquake, and flood to fires, plane crashes, and shipwrecks, all of which have contributed to a national ‘culture of disaster’ (Bankoff, 2003).

## Philippine English

The story of Philippine English has its historical origins in the US intervention of 1898, and the American teachers who arrived here toward the end of the Philippine-American War (see the chapters by Bernardo and Gonzalez in this volume). These first teachers, known collectively as the ‘Thomasites’ (after the US army transport ship *Thomas*), arrived as early as 1901 and were soon dispersed throughout the islands. They had an important impact, not only as teachers, but also as teacher-trainers, so that by 1921, 91 percent of all teachers were native-born Filipinos and, thus, ‘almost from the beginning, Filipinos learned English from Filipinos and the seeds of what we now call Philippine English began’ (Gonzalez, 1997: 26–27). By 1918, the census report noted that around 47 percent of the population claimed to speak English, and 55.6 percent claimed the ability to read and write the language. Official American involvement in the teaching of English persisted until the outbreak of war with the Japanese in December 1941, by which time census results indicated that around 27 percent of the population claimed to be able to speak English. Judging by the experience of other colonized nations, the extent to which English had been adopted within the society by that time was remarkable, and Gonzalez comments that:

The rapid spread of the English language in the Philippines was unprecedented in colonial history, for within the space of 41 years, the American regime had done more to spread English than the Spanish Government did in 333 years (1565–1898) of colonization, for at the end of the Spanish Period, only 2% spoke Spanish. (Gonzalez, 1997: 28)

In the post-independence era after 1946, English was retained as an official language in government and education, but was increasingly used alongside the national language, first termed *Wikang Pambansa* (‘national language’), then later ‘Pilipino’, and ‘Filipino’. Over the decades, Philippine English began to develop as a ‘variety’ of English in its own right, associated with a distinct accent, a localized vocabulary, and even a body of creative writing by Philippine writers in English. From the 1960s onwards, local linguists began to describe this localized variety in some detail, despite anxieties among some educators

and policy-makers that the recognition of 'Philippine English' somehow involved the acceptance of a less-proficient variety of the language (Bautista, 1997). However, the latest results from a Social Weather Stations (2006) survey suggest that some 65 percent of the population claim the ability to understand spoken and written English, with 48 percent stating that they write English, but with only 32 percent reporting that they speak the language. The same report then goes on to explain that these totals indicate a marked decline in English proficiency compared to results from 1993 and 2000 (Social Weather Stations, 2006).

Ironically, this decline (perceived or real) in English proficiency has come at a time when the utility of the language and the demand for English are probably at an all-time high, as a result of the remarkable growth of the call center industry and related BPO (business processing outsourcing) operations, including legal and medical transcription, that have mushroomed in the Philippines since the year 2000. The total of employees in the call center industry in 2001 was around 2,000, but by 2006 that figure had risen astonishingly to some 200,000 jobs. One recent report noted that today '[t]he call center business is the fastest growing industry in the country ... [m]ore than 100 centers around the country have created a new class of relatively affluent and independent young Filipinos' (Greenlees, 2006). The recent growth of call centers is providing opportunities for college graduates on an unprecedented scale, with many in this industry calling for an increased emphasis on English proficiency in the public school system as well as in private sector training schemes.

Nevertheless, despite the obvious utility of English in employment, the power and prestige of the language continue to raise concerns among Filipino intellectuals. One such concern has been that, historically, the retention of English in the postcolonial period has exacerbated social inequality and hindered the creation of an authentic sense of nationalism among Filipinos. According to Tollefson's (1991) critique of Philippine language policy, '[t]he key question in the politics of language in the Philippines is: what language(s) should be used in education and in the exercise of commerce, mass media, politics and government?', as the issue of language planning 'has a crucial impact upon access to economic resources, to policy-making institutions, and to political power' (1991: 141). Tollefson then presents a critique of the politics of language from the 1960s to the 1990s. This includes discussion of the communist New People's Army's promotion of 'Pilipino' (as it was then called) to ensure that 'the national language, art, and literature shall be given revolutionary content', Marcos' promotion of English in order to match the needs of the Philippine economy so that 'most students had to be educated for low-paying jobs requiring a little English', and the language policies of the Aquino administration, which left English in a 'dominant position' (143-61).

The issue of English in relation to the national language has been regularly debated in past decades. Rolando Tinio, writing in the 1980s, argued that reliance on English contributed to the colonized mentality of the Filipino people, whose ‘greatest setback is not our colonial past but our education and development of consciousness in a colonial language’, explaining that:

The dismal result of national dissemination of English in the Philippines — Filipinos still exclaim with joy, “We are the third largest English-speaking country in the world!” — can be seen in the fact that the educated elite and unlettered masses, though no two kinds of people could be more dissimilar, are yet similar in one regard — both tend to see the world through American eyes, accepting the American yardstick as the proper standard for measuring any kind of culture or life. (Tinio 1990: 86)

For Tinio, the issue of English and ‘where English fails’ (in the words of his book’s subtitle) is a matter of postcolonial concern crucially linked to a national culture and national pride. For Tollefson, the promotion of English is less an issue of nationalism and more a problem of economic and social equity, as ‘[t]he impact of using English as the language of government, education, business, technology, and the media is to sustain economic inequalities within Philippine society’ (Tollefson, 1991: 163). Thus questions of power and inequality overlap with the ‘language rights’ of Filipino citizens, as ‘a commitment to democracy means the use of the mother tongue at work and school is a fundamental human right’ (211), although somewhat inexplicably in Tollefson’s analysis, the 100-plus ‘mother tongues’ of Filipinos are equated with Tagalog-based Filipino.

In the decade or so since the critiques of English from Tinio and Tollefson, many of the social and political issues they raise continue to permeate the intellectual debates on language issues, although the current Arroyo administration has tended to uncritically promote English, at least in official rhetoric. Issues related to both the social stratification of English and questions of national identity also surface throughout many of the chapters in this volume.

## Philippine English: Linguistic and literary perspectives

As indicated in our opening remarks above, one clear aim of this book project was to bring together a volume of record which surveyed not only linguistic approaches to Philippine English but the approaches of literary scholars as well. The justification for this was rather clear to us as editors, as the emergence of Philippine English as a variety of the English language has been paralleled by recognition accorded to Philippine writers in English over recent years, with

such novelists as F. Sionil Jose, Nick Joaquin, and Jessica Hagedorn and others attracting substantial international interest.

The chapters in this volume are grouped into the four parts of the book. Part I, 'The Sociolinguistic Context', comprises six chapters. The first three chapters from Gonzalez, Bernardo, and Dayag describe the origins and development of English in Philippine society, education, and media, while those that follow from Tupas, Manarpaac, and Rafael raise a number of theoretical questions of mixed provenance (linguistic, literary, anthropological). Part II 'Linguistic Form' focuses on linguistic description, with one chapter on Philippine languages from McFarland, followed by contributions from Tayao, Bolton and Butler, and Bautista on Philippine English accents, vocabulary, and grammar. The final chapter in Part II, from Lockwood, Forey and Price, includes a detailed discussion of the forms of English, with reference to accent, vocabulary, grammar and discourse, occurring in the call-center context.

Part III, 'Philippine Literature in English', comprises seven contributions. The first from Martin discusses literary education and early Philippine writing in the American colonial period, while the second from Tope provides a stylistic analysis of the 'abrogation' and 'appropriation' of language by Philippine English writers. The following three chapters from Abad, Hidalgo, and Hau survey the genres of short fiction, poetry, and the novel, while the contribution from Yuson charts the importance of diasporic Filipino writers in the US and elsewhere. The last contribution in this section, from Dumdum, Mo, and Mojares, highlights the fact that literary creativity is not confined to Manila, and that other regions, including the Visayas, have their own histories of English. In Part IV, Bautista's research bibliography provides a detailed guide to the academic literature in the field.

## Conclusion

In current discussions of globalization, it has become commonplace to recognize the increasing multilingualism of societies, as the national languages and monolingualism of Western societies in particular are transformed by patterns of immigration, as well as the new literacies of electronic communication. Debates on language policies, however, in many postcolonial contexts still tend to contest the opposition between English as the former colonial language (and/or global *lingua franca*) and a national language, typically lauded as the authentic voice of the people. A recent book by Anderson (2005), however, reminds us that in the era of the Philippine nationalist leader Jose Rizal (executed by the Spanish in 1896), the politics of language took a rather different form:

In the late nineteenth century there was as yet no ugly, commercially debased “international language”. Filipinos wrote to Austrians in German, to Japanese in English, to each other in French, or Spanish, or Tagalog, with liberal interventions from the last beautiful international language, Latin. [...] Filipino leaders were peculiarly adapted to this Babelish world. The language of the political enemy was also their private language, though understood by less than 5 percent of the Philippine population. Tagalog, the native language used in Manila and its immediate periphery, was not understood by most Filipinos, and in any case was useless for international communication. Many speakers of rival local languages, especially Cebuano and Ilocano, preferred Spanish, even though this language was, in the Philippines, a clear marker of elite, even collaborationist status. (Anderson, 2005: 5)

At another level, Anderson notes that the Spanish word *Filipino* had a very different denotation in Rizal’s day, and referred only to the locally-born but ‘pure Spanish’ population. Rizal himself was no Filipino but rather an *Indio* and *ilustrado*, as it was not until later in the American colonial period that the term ‘Filipino’ came to refer to all the inhabitants of the islands. Today, in the Filipino diaspora, the *Pinoy* population of the United States exceeds two million, some eight million workers take their English with them overseas, and Anderson’s ‘ugly and commercially debased language’ provides hundreds of thousands of jobs for lower middle-class Filipinos. The story of English in the Philippines is barely a century old, but seems set to continue. It is our hope that this volume will enable students and scholars to explore at least some of the complexities of this subject, from both linguistic and literary perspectives.

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