Contents

Series editor’s preface xi
Acknowledgements xiii
List of contributors xv
Map of the Philippines xvii

Introduction

Philippine English: Linguistic and literary perspectives 1
Kingsley Bolton and Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista

Part I: The Sociolinguistic Context 11

1 A favorable climate and soil: A transplanted language and literature 13
Andrew Gonzalez, FSC

2 English in Philippine education: Solution or problem? 29
Allan B. I. Bernardo

3 English-language media in the Philippines: Description and research 49
Danilo T. Dayag

4 World Englishes or worlds of English? Pitfalls of a postcolonial discourse in Philippine English 67
T. Ruanni F. Tupas

5 ‘When I was a child I spake as a child’: Reflecting on the limits of a nationalist language policy 87
D. V. S. Manarpaac
6 Taglish, or the phantom power of the lingua franca
Vicente L. Rafael

Part II: Linguistic Forms

7 Linguistic diversity and English in the Philippines
Curtis D. McFarland

8 A lectal description of the phonological features of Philippine English
Ma. Lourdes G. Tayao

9 Lexicography and the description of Philippine English vocabulary
Kingsley Bolton and Susan Butler

10 Investigating the grammatical features of Philippine English
Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista

11 English in Philippine call centers and BPO operations: Issues, opportunities, and research
Jane Lockwood, Gail Forey, and Helen Price

Part III: Philippine English Literature

12 Colonial education and the shaping of Philippine literature in English
Isabel Pefianco Martin

13 Negotiating language: Postcolonialism and nationalism in Philippine literature in English
Lily Rose Tope

14 ‘This scene so fair’: Filipino English poetry, 1905–2005
Gémino H. Abad

15 The Philippine short story in English: An overview
Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

16 The Filipino novel in English
Caroline S. Hau
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Filipino diasporic literature</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alfred A. Yuson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>In conversation: Cebuano writers on Philippine literature and English</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Simeon Dumdum, Timothy Mo, and Resil Mojares</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part IV</td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bibliographical resources for researching English in the Philippines</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td></td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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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 ... more 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 Dundum, 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.

References


Abad, Antonio 358
Abad-Jugo, Cyan, see Jugo, Cyan Abad
abrogation 267–71
Achebe, Chinua 97, 264
acrolect 20, 159–66, 168–70, 172–4, 231–2; see also basilect; edulect; lects; mesolect
Adlawan, Tem 365
Adler, Martha A. 319
Adolphs, Svenja 219
Agcaoili, T. D. 304–5
Agoncillo, Teodoro A. 108, 110, 124
Aguila, Cesar 310
Aguilar, Jose V. 30
Agustin, Jim Pascual 295, 347
Ahmad, Aijah 68, 78
Ahmed, Zubair 225
Alberca, Wilfredo L. 14, 19, 58, 158, 169, 201
Alberto, P. L. 267
Alcantara, Gene 347
Alegre, Edilberto N. 255
Alias, Denise Chou 123
Alip, Efronio M. 257
Almario, Virgilio 123
Alumit, Noel 345–6
Alvarez, Ivy 347
Alzona, Encarnacion 318
Amansec, Lilia Pablo 305, 307
America 24, 131, 146, 148, 177, 248, 282, 284, 293, 302, 321, 323, 325–6, 329, 342, 346, 348; see also United States
Anderson, Benedict 7–8, 76, 115, 123, 322, 324
Angeles, Carlos A. 286–7, 294, 342
Anvil-Macquarie Dictionary 58, 184–7; see also dictionaries
Apeles, Teena 350
Aquino, Belinda A. 346
Aquino, Benigno ‘Ninoy’ 111, 308
Aquino, Cesar Ruiz 295, 305
Aquino, Corazon C. 3, 5, 22, 115, 308
Aquino, Cory, see Aquino, Corazon C.
Aquino, Milagros R. 58
Arañas, Patria Garcia 201
Arcellana, Francisco 293, 299, 302–5, 313, 342
Arcellana, Juaniyo 295
Arguilla, Manuel E. 95, 293, 295, 303, 313
Ashcroft, Bill 67–9, 261–2, 267–8, 271
Asian Englishes 21, 24, 61, 67–86, 157, 180, 183, 204, 217, 220, 225, 234
Ateneo de Manila University 307, 309, 321; see also universities
Aureus, Carlos 308
Australian English 176, 178
Austronesian languages 2, 18, 131–56, 222
authors, see Philippine English literature: Cebuano writers
Ayala, Jose V. 305
Azurin, Arnold Molina 96–7
Bacho, Peter 349
Baguingan, Gloria D. 36
Bailey, Richard 264
Bain, Peter 220, 228
Castillo, Erwin 305, 307, 364
Cebu 107
Cebuano writers 357–68
Cebuano, Cebuanos 2, 8, 21, 63, 131–56, 163, 188, 222, 247, 319, 338–9, 343, 362
census 4, 14, 21, 319
Cerenio, Virginia 346, 349–50
Chai, Arlene J. 310, 321, 347
Chang, Chih-Mei 43–4
Cheah, Pheng 322
Chu, Yiu Wai 68
Churchill, Bernardita 14
cinema, see Philippine cinema (film)
class, see social class
code-mixing 40, 93, 144–5, 383–5
Collins COBUILD Dictionary 204, 210–11, 213; see also dictionaries
colonial education 245–60
colonial literary canon 247–55
colonial period 13–16
communists 326, 328, 332
competence, see English language competence
Constantino, Ernesto A. 154
Constantino, Renato 31, 33–4, 76, 247, 306
corpus linguistics 201–18
Cortes, Carlos 308
Coulmas, Florian 89–90, 188
Croghan, Richard 307
Cruz, Andres Cristobal 305
Cruz, Isagani R. 16, 18–19, 97, 124, 183, 190, 331, 372
Cu, Ernest L. 223
Culler, Jonathan 317, 322
culture 261–78, 322–3, 360
da Costa, Rafael Zulueta, see Zulueta da Costa, Rafael
Dalisay, Jose Y., Jr. 97, 308, 311, 313–4, 326
Dato, Luis G. 283–4, 293
Dato, Rodolfo 282, 293
David, Joel 125
Davis, Rocio G. 342–3, 347
Dayag, Danilo T. 7, 22, 49–66
Dayrit, Joy 308
Daza, Julie Y. 123
de Guzman, Estefania S. 36
de Jesus-Chua, Noelle Q. 347
de la Paz, Oliver 345–6
De La Salle University 294, 309, 321; see also universities
de los Santos, Marisa 346
de Ocampo, Nick 116
de Ungria, Ricardo M. 295
Dei, George J. Sefa 67
Dekker, P. Gregory 36
del Mundo, Clodualdo, Jr. 124
Delbridge, Arthur 21
Demetillo, Ricardo 294, 342
diaspora, see Filipino diaspora
dictionaries, see Anvil-Macquarie Dictionary, Collins COBUILD Dictionary, Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, Webster's Dictionary
Dimalanta, Ophelia A. 18, 295, 340, 342
Dirks, Nicholas B. 81
Dirlik, Arif 68–9, 78
Dissanayake, Wimal 68
Dizon, D. Paulo 304
Dominguez, Carol 224, 227
Doronila, Amando 34
Dumdum, Simeon 7, 291, 295, 357–68
Dylen, Isidore 154

Eagleton, Terry 322
economy 3
EDSA revolt, the 115, 116, 122, 328
education 22, 29–48, 77, see also languages in education
edulect 20–1; see also acrolect; basilect; lects; mesolect
Eggs, Suzanne 230
English and indigenous languages 143–4
English as a medium of instruction 279
English language competence 224
English language media 49–66; see also language and the media
Enriquez, Antonio Reyes 265–6, 307–8, 313, 328
Enriquez, Emigdio Alvarez 320
Halleck, Reuben P. 249
Halliday, Michael 230
Hansen, Miriam 123
Hau, Caroline S. 7, 74, 123, 317–36
Headland, Janet D. 154
Headland, Thomas N. 154
Heller, Monica 81
Hernandez, Jose M. 256–7
Hidalgo, Antonio 308
Hidalgo, Cesar A. 88–9, 99, 188
Hidalgo, Cristina P. 299–316, 321
Hiligaynon 30, 131–56, 188, 283, 319, 338
Holborow, Marnie 73, 78
Hollander, John 291
Hollday, Adrian 78
Holthe, Tess Uriza 345–6
Hong Kong English 177, 201–2, 208, 216–17
Hood, Susan 237
Hufana, Alejandrino G. 287–8, 291, 295
Huggan, Graham 329
Huk rebellion, the 328
Hutton, Christopher 67, 80
hybridity 348
Hymes, Dell 78

ICE, see *International Corpus of English*
Igloria, Luisa 295, 346
Igorrote 180
*ikabod* 110–15
Ilio, Dominador 270, 294
Ilocano, see *Ilokano*
Iloilo 107
Ilokano, Ilokano 2, 131–56, 338
*ilustrados* 8, 103, 123–4, 186, 301, 312, 318, 332, 339, 358
imperialism 365
India 71, 78, 212, 216, 225–6, 264, 363–5
indigenous languages 1–2, 23, 88–91, 99–100, 131, 157, 187–8, 247, 289, 371; see also English and indigenous languages
Infante, J. Eddie 124
Institute of National Language, see *Surian ng Wikang Pambansa*
International Corpus of English (ICE) 201–18
Irving, Washington 248, 250, 252
Ishiguro, Kazuo 340

Jambalos, Thelma V. 201–2
Jannedy, Stephanie 162
Japanese (language) 16, 107, 363
Japanese (people) 304, 348, 365–6
Javellana, Stevan 304, 321, 325
Javier, Paolo 345
Jinkinson, Beth 3
jolography 275–6
Joos, Martin 19–20, 216
Jose, F. Sionil 7, 18, 24, 304–6, 308, 320–1, 326–8
Jugo, Cyan Abad 308
Jurich, Sonia 38

Kachru, Braj 67–70, 73–4, 78, 80, 220, 225, 262, 266
Kalaw, Maximo M. 95, 323
Kandiah, Thiru 77–8
Kapampangan 131–56
Kaplan, Robert B. 189–90
Katigbak, Luis 308
Kimura, Masataka 325
Kramer, Paul A. 192
Kroeber, Alfred L. 182
Kubota, Ryuko 235
Kuiipers, Joel C. 188
Kwon, Youngshim 43

Lacaba, Jose F. 109–10, 112, 306
Lacaba, Kris 275
Lacuesta, Angelo 308
Lacuesta, Lolita R. 124
language and the media: 49–66; television 49–51; vocabulary 55–8; see also English language media
language attitudes 382–3
language planning 5, 374–6
language policies 5–7, 29–48, 87–100, 374–6
language rights 6
language surveys 5, 30, 159, 247, 249–51
language training 221–3
languages in education: 29–48, 376–82;
    English 14, 29–48, 74–8
languages of instruction, see medium of instruction
Lara, Susan 308
Laslo, Pablo 293
Laurel, R. Kwan 332
Laurilla, Mildred Rojo 61
Lauter, Paul 248
Laya, Juan C. 320, 325, 363
lects 20–1; see also acrolect; basilect; edulect; mesolect
Legaspi, Joseph O. 345
Lehner, Al 235
Levinson, Stephen 60
lexicon of Philippine English, see Philippine English: lexicon
Lim, Jaime An 295, 308,
Lim, Paulino, Jr. 24, 346
Lim, Shirley Geok-Lin 329
Lim-Wilson, Fatima 295, 345–6
Lin, Angel M. Y. 77
linguistic imperialism 67, 91–4, 267
Linmark, R. Zamora 349
literature, see Philippine English literature
Litiatco, Alfredo 16, 293
Llamzon, Teodoro A. 19–21, 58, 96, 158–9, 168–9, 201, 220, 231, 266
Lloyd, David 322
Lo Bianco, Joseph 40
Lockwood, Jane 7, 219–42
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth 245–6, 248–50, 253
Lopez, Cecilio 134
Lopez, Salvador P. 15, 284, 293, 295, 303, 305, 313, 324, 329
Lowenberg, Peter H. 68, 211
Lukacs, Georg 326
Lumbera, Bienvenido 246–7, 269, 295, 300–1, 312
Lumbera, Cynthia Nograles 246–7, 269, 300–1, 312
lyric poetry 254
Mabanglo, Elynia Ruth 346
Mabini, Apolinario 13
Macapagal-Arroyo, Gloria 3, 22, 224, 338
Macedo, Donaldo 250
Macken-Horarik, Mary 230
Macquarie Dictionary 184–7
Madrid, Renato 307–8, 313
Madrunio, Marilu R. 61
magazines 54–5, 311
Magindanao 132
Majul, Cesar Adib 13
Manalang-Gloria, Angela C. 264–5, 283–4
Manalansan, Martin 125, 350
Manalo, Paolo 274–5, 295
Manarpaac, D. V. S. 7, 87–100
Manguera-Brainard, Cecilia 310, 343, 345–6
Maniquiz, Mike 350
Manlapaz, Edna Z. 287, 292–3
Maranan, Edgardo B. 295, 347
Maranao 132, 140
Marcelo, Nonoy 111–4
Marcos Regime, the, see Marcos, Ferdinand
Marcos, Ferdinand 3, 5, 88–9, 96–7, 107, 110–1, 114–5, 125, 306–8, 325–6, 328, 331, 338, 344, 348
Markus, Gyorgy 322
Marquardt, Frederic S. 179
Martin, Dalmacio 246
Martin, Isabel P. 7, 29, 245–60
Martin, James 230, 237
Martinez, David C. 350
Martinez, Norma D. 158
mass media 49–66, 107; linguistic research 58–63; see also English language media; language and the media; magazines; newspapers; Philippine cinema; radio; television
Matthiessen, Christian 230
Mazrui, Alamin M. 78–9
Mazrui, Ali 263
McArthur, Tom 80
McDermott, Ray 188
McFarland, Curtis D. 2, 7, 131–56, 190
McFerson, Hazel M. 2, 192
McKinley, William 29, 318
McKinnon, William D. 13, 246
McPhate, Mike 225
Medalla, David Cortes 347
media in English, see English language media
media, see mass media
Medina, Loreta M. 347
medium of instruction 29–48, 88, 318, 361; see also English as a medium of instruction
Melendrez-Cruz, Patricia 35
Melvin, Reine Arcache 310, 347
memorization 17, 250–1
Mencken, H. L. 176
Mendoza, Diana 3
Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary 187, 190; see also dictionaries
mesolect 20, 158–70, 172–4, 231–2; see also acrolect; basilect; edulect; lects
Mestizos/as 2, 103–5, 111, 113, 117, 123
Miller, Kevin F. 43
Millward, C. M. 153–4
mimicry 253–6
Minahal, Maiana 350
Miraflor, Norma 305, 310, 347
Miura, Irene T. 43
Mo, Timothy 7, 340, 357–68
Mojares, Resil 7, 300–2, 307, 319, 328–9, 331, 357–68
Monroe, Paul 13–14, 30, 35, 247, 251
Mooney, Isabela Banzon 264–6, 273–4
Moro 180
mother tongue 6, 31–6, 157, 217, 221–2, 268, 357
Mulholland, Kate 220, 228
multilingualism 7, 20–1, 23, 40, 44, 317, 371; see also bilingualism
Murray, Sabina 349
Naipaul, V. S. 360
Nation, James 268
national language 4, 89–91; see also Wikang Pambansa
National Language Law (1936) 16
nationalism 5, 21, 31, 74, 87–100, 106, 108, 190, 261–78, 322–6
native languages 8, 30, 40–1, 88, 131–58, 168–9, 231, 245–7, 257–8, 267–70, 283, 291, 302, 322, 339–40
Navarro, Rene J. 347
Nayyar, Deepak 72
Nepomuceno, Joseph 345
Nero, Shondel J. 157
new Englishes 157, 176–8, 190, 216, 266, 371
New Zealand English 176
New, W. H. 261
Newell, Leonard E. 189
newspapers 22, 53–4, 59–63, 312
Nezhukumatathil, Aimee 345
Ngugi wa Thiong’o 261
Nielo, Alberto M. 294
Nkrumah, Kwame 71
Nolledo, Wilfrido D. 305–6, 329, 342
novel, see Philippine English literature: novel
Ocampo, Ambeth 124
Okamoto, Yukari 44
Olega, Jesus C. 293–4
Ondaatje, Michael 340
Ong, Charlson 308, 320–1, 327, 332
Ong, Han 349
Ordoñez, Elmer A. 33, 226
Ordoñez, Victor 346
Orsini, Francesca 330
Osmubal, Papa 347
Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) 37–8
Palanca, Clinton 308
Pallesen, A. Kemp 154
Pangasinan 131–56
Parakrama, Aljuna 73, 78
Pascasio, Eny M. 34
Pascual, Wilfredo O., Jr. 347
Patalinjug, Ricardo 307
Paterno, Ma. Elena 265–6, 308
Paterno, Pedro 332
Peñaranda, Oscar 345–6, 349
Peña-Reyes, Myrna 295, 346
Pennycook, Alastair 39, 67, 69, 73, 78, 80
pensionados 15, 76, 292, 339
Perez, Gilbert S. 179
Philippine cinema (film) 115–22
Philippine Commonwealth, the 16
Philippine English language: 13, 18, 220; borrowings 179–80; competence 22–3; consonants 162–3, 172; decline of English 30–1; features 385–91; grammar 18–19, 201–18; history 13–27; intonation 166–7; lexicography 175–200; lexicicon 18–19; linguistic features 129–241; morphology and syntax
201–18; phonology 18–19, 157–74; proficiency 37–8, 219, 224; segmental phonology 161–4, 168–9; social stratification 6; sociolinguistics 11–127; standard of English 224–6; stress 164–6, 174; suprasegmental phonology 164–7, 169–70; vocabulary 175–200; vocabulary in the media 55–8; vowels 163–4, 173; see also English language media; language and the media


Philippine languages: 131–56; borrowed phrases from English 150–2; borrowed words with Tagalog affixes 148–50; borrowing from English 145–8; borrowing from Philippine languages 179–80; groupings 140–2; language change 138–9; phonology 133–4; syntax 134–8; see also indigenous languages

Philippine-American War 3–4, 13, 191, 301, 328

Philippines: ethnic groups 2; geography 2; literature 245–60; sociolinguistics 11–127; see also Philippine languages

Phillipson, Robert 39–40, 67, 80, 91–5

pidgin 20

Pilipino 4, 21, 32, 81, 88, 89, 107, 143, 144, 181, 189, 258, 295, 329, 332

Pineda, Jon 345

Pineda, P. B. 40–1

Platt, John 268

Poe, Edgar Allan 252

poetry, see Philippine English literature: poetry

Polotan, Kerima 304, 306–7, 320, 327

postcolonialism 67–86, 87–100, 261–78, 322

Prah, Kwesi K. 71, 81

Prator, Clifford H. 17, 29, 31, 166

Price, Helen 7, 219–42

private schools 20

Protacio-Marcelino, Elizabeth 33, 35

Puatu, Mar V. 310, 346

public schools 20

Purser, John T. 285

Quezon, Manuel L. 88, 103, 189, 295, 329

Quijano de Manila 123

Quimpo, Nathan G. 2

Quirk, Randolph 57, 80, 209

radio 22, 51–2

Rafael, Vicente L. 7, 101–28, 345–6, 361, 363

Rajagopalan, Kanavillil 78

Ramanathan, Vaidehi 71, 77–8

Ramos, Fidel V. 3, 22, 115, 320

Ramos, Geoffrey P. 223

Ramos, Maximino 30, 36

reading materials 17, 322

Realuyo, Bino A. 310, 321, 343–5

Recto, Claro M. 358

Reich, Robert B. 38

Reid, Lawrence A. 154

Remoto, Danton 125, 295

Reyes, Barbara J. Pulmano 350

Reyes, Emmanuel 120, 124

Reyes, Melissa Lopez 36, 43

Reyes, Myrna Peña, see Peña-Reyes, Myrna

Reyes, Soledad S. 319

Reyes, Virgil 347

Rivera, Aida R. 304, 308

Rividad, Emma 327

Rizal, Jose 7, 8, 13, 103, 123, 199, 290, 301–2, 312, 318, 324–5, 331–2, 339, 358, 366

Robertson, James A. 182, 318

Robinson, Jay 115, 264

Rodas, Jovita Zimmerman, see Zimmerman Rodas, Jovita

Rodriguez, Gloria F. 321

Roley, Brian Ascalon 310, 349

Romero, Ma. Corona S. 201

Rosal, Patrick 345

Rosca, Ninotchka 20, 24, 306–7, 310, 313, 321, 328, 343–4

Rose, David 230

Rose, Ed 220

Ross, Bruce Clunies 329

rote learning 17, 250–1

Rotor, Arturo 16, 255, 284, 303
Ruiz, Rochita C. 347
Rushdie, Salman 309, 340

Sabado, Joseph 345
Saguisag, Lara 308
Said, Edward 67
Salamanca, Bonifacio 30
Salanga, Alfrredo Navarro 288–9
Saleeby, Najeeb Mitry 30, 35
Salmi, Jamil 38
Samar-Leyte 132
San Juan, Epifanio, Jr. 33, 71, 78, 295
Sanchez, Wilfredo Pascua 305, 350, 364
Santos-Taylor, Marcelline 350
Saramiento, Menchu 308
Sarreal, Nadine 310, 347
Sartre, Jean-Paul 71, 306
Schneider, Edgar W. 204
Schumacher, John N. 318
Schwab, Irene 78
Seguevica, Lorna Z. 330
Selden, Raman 258
Sering, Tara F. T. 309, 314
Serna, Scott 69, 71, 72
Shakespeare, William 246, 248, 250, 253, 329
Shannon, George Pope 253–4
Shaw, Angel 344–5
Shohat, Ella 69, 78
short fiction, see Philippine English literature: short story
short story, see Philippine English literature: short story
Shibayan, Bonifacio P. 17, 30, 32, 34–5, 40, 74–7, 88, 94, 266, 330
Silbey, David J. 191
Silliman University 309, 321; see also universities
Sitoy, Lakambini 308
Skivamakrishnan, K. 69
Skinner, Michelle Cruz 310, 343, 346, 350
Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove 39–40, 79
Slade, Diane 230
SMS, see Short Message Service
Snyder, Edward D. 249
Snyder, Franklyn B. 249
sociolinguistics 13–127
sociology of language 374–6
Solliongco, I. P. 248
Spain 104, 106, 301, 348
Spanish (language) 87, 89, 105–9, 111–2, 148, 179–80, 246, 283, 358–60, 362
Spanish (people) 2, 89, 365
Spanish colonialism 178
Spanish-American War 3, 87
spoken English 14
Sta. Ana, Alan 158
Standard American English 225
standard English 264–71
standardization 20–1
Stapleton, Lara 343, 345
Starnes, Sofia M. 346
Stickmon, Janet 350
Stigler, James W. 43
Stiglitz, Joseph E. 69
Strobel, Leny Mendoza 345–6
Subido, Abelardo 293
Sullivan, Louis R. 182
Surian ng Wikang Pambansa (Institute of National Language) 40
Svalberg, Agneta M. L. 234
Swain, Merrill 230
Swales, John M. 204
systemic functional linguistics 230
Tabios, Eileen 345
Tabor, Myrna G.A. 183
Tadiar, Neferti Xina 326
Tagalog 2, 16, 21, 88–9, 98, 105–9, 111–2, 118, 131–56, 180, 215, 300–1, 338–9, 343, 363
Taglish 1, 50, 52, 55, 101–28, 144–5, 319, 329, 338, 367
Tahimik, Kidlat 116
Talib, Ismail 267, 270, 275
Tarrosa-Subido, Trinidad L. 283–4, 293
Tayao, Ma. Lourdes G. 7, 19, 58, 157–74, 220, 231–3
Taylor, Philip 220, 228
  teaching of literature 245–60
  television 22, 49–51
Teodoro, Luis V. 307
Terra, Perfecto, Jr. 347
texting, see SMS (Short Message Service)
Tharp, James A. 154
Thomas, Paul 322
Thomasites, the 4, 14, 177, 179
Thompson, Roger M. 319, 329
Thornton, William H. 72
Thumboo, Edwin May 264, 266, 272
Tiempo, Edilberto K. 304, 306, 332, 342
Tiempo, Edith L. 97, 285–7, 290, 294, 304, 309, 320, 342
Tiempo-Torrevillas, Rowena, see Torrevillas, Rowena Tiempo
Tiffin, Helen 261
Tinio, Rolando S. 6, 268–9
Tinio, Victoria L. 74
Tollefson, James W. 5–6, 35, 74–5
Tope, Lily Rose 7, 261–78
Torres, Emmanuel 288, 290–1, 295, 310–1
Torrevillas, Rowena Tiempo 295, 307, 310, 346
Turner, George W. 176
Ty-Casper, Linda, see Casper, Linda Ty

UNESCO 38, 246
United States 13–16, 23, 29, 74, 245–60, 321, 326, 337; see also America
universities, see Ateneo de Manila University; De La Salle University; Siliman University; University of Santo Tomas; University of the Philippines
University of Santo Tomas 257, 309, 321, 340; see also universities
University of the Philippines 13–14, 189, 253–4, 256, 279, 299, 301–2, 309, 321, 341, 358; see also universities
UP, the, see University of the Philippines
Uranza, Azucena Grajo 270, 320, 328
Valeros, Florentino B. 320
Valle, Charles 345
varieties of English 224–6, 263–6

Vaux, James Hardy 178
Vega, Joel H. 347
Ventura, Rey 347
Vilches, Ma. Luz 41
Villacorta, Wilfrido V. 90–1
Villanueva, Marianne 310, 345–6
Villarreal, Corazon D. 79, 268
Villena, Rosemarie 36
Viray, Francisco 16
Viray, Manuel A. 293, 295, 304, 342
Virtusio, Genaro 256
Visayan English 366
Visayans, see Cebuanos

Wagemakers, Ella Sanchez 347
Wagner, Daniel A. 81
Walcott, Derek 263, 268
Walton, Charles 154
Warren, Robert P. 285
Webster, Noah 253
Webster’s Dictionary 57–8, 175, 181–2, 190–1, 195; see also dictionaries
Wee, Lionel 81
Weisser, Edna 347
White, Peter 230, 237
Wickberg, Edgar 123
Wikang Pambansa (national language) 4, 16, 107
Williams, Raymond 324
Witt, L. Alan 220
Worcester, Dean C. 182
world Englishes 67–86, 176
Wright, Gillian 220
writers, see Philippine English literature:
  Cebuano writers
  written English 14, 19
Wurfel, David 33

Yabes, Leopoldo Y. 302–4, 313
Yap, Fe Aldave 181–2
Yeo, Robert 263
Young, Robert J. C. 68–71
Yuson, Alfred A. 7, 289–90, 295, 307–8, 313, 320, 327, 337–56
Zabus, Chantal 268
Zafra, Jessica 308, 311
Zaide, Gregorio F. 279
Zimmerman Rodas, Jovita 346
Zorc, R. David Paul 154, 189
Zulueta da Costa, Rafael 16, 272, 284–5, 287, 294