On the Status of English in the Philippines

Francine Yvonne B. Dela Cruz

There is no denying how vast the space the English language has taken up in the Filipino consciousness. In my personal experience, the medium of instruction that I grew up learning in school has always been a combination of Filipino and English, and so, it has always been part of my worldview. While American colonial rule ended in 1946, English remains ever-so pervasive in many domains and institutions, including our schools, the media we consume, and in various job sectors. Seeing its pervasive use in the Philippine context, it is worthwhileto consider the position of Philippine English as a World English, which according to Kirkpatrick and Deterding (2011), reflects the local phenomena and cultural values found in the community where the language takes root. The coinage of the term *World Englishes* in itself exhibits the unmatched dominance of English beyond the bounds of being a lingua franca, used as an instrument for global communication, seeing how it has become adopted, modified, and integrated directly into the languages of other nations.

In the case of the Philippines, English is classified as a secondary language (Kirkpatrick & Deterding, 2011), primarily used for official partaking in administration, law, business, education, media, etc. It is also recognized as one of the two official languages of the country, the other of which is Filipino. This status of English in the Philippines as a secondary language corresponds to the Outer Circle classification in Kachru's Circles of English model (Schneider, 2011). It was explained that most countries in the Outer Circle, like the Philippines, were former English or American colonies that, through time, institutionalized their use of the English language. Schneider, however, cited several critiques of Kachru's model, which all point to the argument that looking at the sociolinguistic situation of these countries, in reality, there is no definite set of features or standards that could sharply demarcate the circles from one another. I agree with this common point of the said critiques; as I have learned in many social science classes, models only serve as convenient representations of complex relationships among different concepts. In reality, the clear-cut nature of these paradigms is not as simple as they seem to be. Hence, in the case of World Englishes, it is crucial to examine the actual way speakers use them. Given how pervasive English is, it is quite difficult to measure the extent of its actual reach and impact on the consciousness of speakers of World Englishes.

Going back to Philippine English, there have already been several studies examining the status of the English language in the Philippines. For instance, focusing on the politics of Philippine English, Tupas (2004) cited Llamzon's (1969) structural analysis

of what he identified as the *Standard Filipino English* variety. However, it is critical to note that this variety Llamzon was referring to was based on the English that educated Filipinos spoke at the time. We can see that the hierarchy in the languages that we favor and view as being prestigious in our country extends even to the variety of English that we use. With his focus on the English of the Filipino "educated" circle, we see how Llamzon's basis for his proposed variety of Philippine English is primarily extracted from the variety of English that is closer to the Standard American English variety. Perhaps we can also attribute this inherent preference to the expectation of and aspiration for "native-like performance" in the language, something which we commonly observe among Filipino call center agents (Bolton, 2011). To illustrate, in my senior high school, we were required to take a class called Contact Center Services which in essence served as preliminary training for entering the call center industry. One tip I got during class on how to sound more "native" when taking calls is to substitute the word "three" with "free" if it's difficult to pronounce the dental fricative [θ] sound. Apparently, at least according to our instructor in that class, "free" sounds more similar to the actual pronunciation of the word when talking on the phone compared to replacing it with the alveolar plosive [t] sound. From this, I was able to see early on how the pursuit of "perfecting" one's English-speaking abilities and conforming with the Standard English variety are encouraged and praised in the Philippines.

Pefianco-Martin (2014) also brought to light the issue of the acceptability of Philippine English in the discourse of English in the country as it is used in scholarly and non-scholarly contexts. In my experience, for most college papers, students are expected to write in fluent and flawless English based on the Standard English variety, which assumes that it is expected of us to have that capability. Thus, most of the time, codeswitching is discouraged and corrections for the wrong use of the Standard English grammatical system are pointed out. Outside the academe, we can also see how varieties of English used in the Philippines that do not conform to the "standard" are often laughed at and derogatorily described as "barok" or "English carabao."

Consequently, for those outside the educated circle of our society, access to certain things can be difficult because of their lack of proficiency in the "accepted" English variety among the educated. Due to years of education that heavily favors the use of English, there are many like me who find it more comfortable and are more attuned to reading scholarly texts written in the Standard English language. I find it challenging to digest works written in Filipino. Linguistic research written in Filipino, for example, tends to use hard-to-understand or rarely used Filipino terms. Additionally, to sum up my general experience, English is the commonly preferred medium for teaching technical concepts. If this is the dynamic that plays in education, then it makes the academe more and more inaccessible to those outside the educated circle, who belong to the Expanding Circle category in Pefianco-Martin's (2014) proposed version of the Circles of English in the Philippine context. With this, we can see how the use of English drives stratification in Philippine society. This is evident from the fact that those with a more privileged status in society have more access to English, and in turn, opportunities for economic growth. As Schneider (2011) explained, English is economically useful as

an instrument to acquire a reputable and good-paying job, further proving how social struggles are reflected in our language use.

On the question of whether Philippine English will ever be institutionalized and accepted as a unique and legitimate English variety by Filipinos, the answer I have reached is: it is unlikely. As Tupas (2004) puts it, our use of English has translated into the appropriation of Western concepts and discourses in our local culture and practices. As a result, patronizing Americanized concepts and preferences is widely accepted—even encouraged—in the country, even if it is at the expense of our own Filipino ideals. This is also the reason why the English language can't be left out of the discourse on national language, language planning, and language policies in the Philippine context. It impacts not only education but also extends greatly into the conversation on nationalism, ethnolinguistic identity, and, at the socioeconomic level, our incessant focus on and pursuit for globalization. This just goes to show how English in the Philippines, at least for now, will continue to serve as a neocolonial language and instrument for shaping Filipinos' ideals.

References

Bolton, K. (2011). World Englishes and Philippine call centres. In A. Kirkpatrick (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of World Englishes* (2nd ed., pp. 543–557). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003128755-37

Kirkpatrick, A., & Deterding, D. (2011). World Englishes. In J. Simpson (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of applied linguistics* (1st ed., pp. 373–387). Routledge.

Llamzon, T. A. (1969). *Standard Filipino English*, Ateneo De Manila University.

Pefianco-Martin, I. (2014). Philippine English revisited. *World Englishes*, 33(1), 50–59. https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12054

Schneider, E. W. (2011). Colonization, globalization, and the sociolinguistics of World Englishes. In R. Mesthrie (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of sociolinguistics* (pp. 335–354). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511997068.025

Tupas, T. R. F. (2004). The politics of Philippine English: Neocolonialism, global politics, and the problem of postcolonialism. *World Englishes*, 23(1), 47–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2004.00334.x