Linguistic Imperialism and the Filipino Identity

         In a world where colonization and imperialization of other nations have been used to show a country’s success and superiority, it is unsurprising that this mindset has left a lasting impact on many countries and their cultures. Particularly, the Philippines exemplifies these impacts to this day as seen in the effects of linguistic imperialism on the identity of Filipinos and Filipino Americans. This topic is significant to me as a Filipino American with friends who also share feelings that English has affected our identities. Through my research, I plan to understand more on Filipino linguistic imperialism, focusing primarily on English.

When looking at the impact of English on Filipino identity, it is crucial to understand the

historical context of colonization in the Philippines. The Philippines was colonized multiple times, most notably by the Spanish, Americans, and Japanese (Zeng & Yang 8). By its nature, colonization involves imposing the colonizer's language and culture on the colonized. This prolonged period of colonization, undoubtedly left a lasting impact on Filipino society. The Filipino languages were “devalued and ridiculed in favor of colonial languages,” particularly English and Spanish (North 12). Filipino students were further punished for using their native languages and were taught to prioritize English or Spanish over their mother tongues. These early influences imprinted the mindset that placed greater value on colonial languages, leading to a sense of inferiority and personal rejection of their native tongue.This phenomenon known as linguistic imperialism, continues to affect Filipino identity today. Despite the Philippines being a country with an abundance of native languages, English holds a position of dominance due to its historical imperialism. My research project aims to investigate the effects of linguistic imperialism on Filipino identities.

Past research on Philippine education, English language use, and Filipino immigrants in the United States explores English's role in shaping the identity of Filipinos and Filipino Americans. Nicholas Macias-Williams’s study’s participants revealed that their first exposure to Philippine English occurred in school starting in kindergarten (Macias-Williams 43). They found that English is apart of the basic skills like color recognition, showing early and prioritized integration into the education. The data from this study collectively suggests that English is the primary language of instruction in Philippine schools, with subjects taught exclusively in English. Also, participants mentioned that “while there was not a strong emphasis on speaking English like Americans, rather there was an emphasis on understanding and communicating effectively in English” (Macias-Williams 86). Another study was conducted by the Migration Policy Institute on Filipino immigrants in the U.S. They found that 17 percent of all immigrants in the U.S. who only spoke English at home, 16 percent were Filipino immigrants (Davis & Batalova 2). As well as a third study that looked at how colonial history affects Filipino Americans perception of their own identity in Hawai’i, finding that it leads to cultural inferiority, and distancing from Filipino heritage (Eisen, Takasaki & Tagayuna). These findings emphasize the extensive influence of English in Philippine education and the existing perspective that it is an essential tool for success in a competitive world. Showing how deeply ingrained the English language is in Filipinos' daily lives and learning. This indicates that English's influence on identity starts early and runs deep. As well as a significant portion of Filipino immigrants speaking only English at home, exemplifies a strong influence of English in their lives and potentially on their sense of identity. Even as far as causing internalized racism and rejection of their own identity.

Moreover, I conducted my own research to gain more data to help me investigate linguistic imperialism's effects. Filipino and Filipino American participants in the study volunteered on two online forums on Reddit.com, specifically forums about Filipino and Tagalog, each with thousands of members. A total of 30 participants completed the online poll I posted on both of the forums, which asked, “Do you think the English language has affected your sense of identity and culture as a Filipino?” I then paired the poll with a "why" question to explain their poll choice. The poll results showed a range of opinions, with 11 strongly agreeing, 8 agreeing, 6 neutral, 1 disagreed, and 4 strongly disagreed that English affected their identity.

I also included a non-poll question, “How has the English language influenced how you communicate and connect with others in your daily life?” This question aimed to see the impact of the English language on personal communication and connection, which are a few key components and contributors of identity. Unfortunately, only two responses were received, but they provided great insight in expressing their personal experiences of being affected by English in their social interactions. One was about how it affects their communication in educational and workplace settings, expressing that they connect better with when speaking Tagalog informally and not at all when speaking English. The other responder remarked on how their level of English proficiency contributed to their experiences when attempting to connect with their peer, stating it “was hard and made me feel like an outcast.”

Analyzing the poll results and questions points towards a strong consensus among the participants that the English language has influenced their sense of identity. While most respondents agreed or strongly agreed, there were also some differing opinions. Interestingly, 20 percent of participants expressed a neutral stance, showing that while English is a significant part of their lives, it has not inherently altered their sense of identity as Filipinos. Seeing it as something necessary or practical but not something defining them. They attributed this to the widespread use of both Filipino and English in various areas of Filipino society, leading to the perception of linguistic diversity as a norm. On the other hand, 16 percent of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that the English language altered their sense of Filipino identity, noting its integration into Filipino society as an aspect of cultural identity. Rather than detracting from their Filipino side, they later perceived it as adding to their culture.

Collectively, 63 percent of the voters who chose strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. Responders expressed that English has influenced how they see themselves and their culture. Those who did commonly shared experiences of specifically feeling alienated and like impostors, some even feeling so in their own homes. Some written responders explained that it was due to American media and pop culture exposure. One participant remarks these feelings resulted from their subconscious association of “English with the upper class and academia” as a result of “some sort of neocolonial subjugation,” referring to linguistic imperialism. This poll has demonstrated the complex relationship between the English language and Filipino identity. The data suggests that English has influenced the sense of identity for many participants. It also shows that while it has played a significant role for most, its impact is many-sided and differs from person to person.

Furthermore, I was able to see that based on the data there is a trend indicating that feelings of English affecting identity stem from a language barrier. Particularly for those who primarily speak either English or a Filipino language. Non-English-proficient Filipino participants described difficulties connecting with peers. They also felt “alienated,” “like an imposter,” and “anxious” about their language use, as exemplified by a participant's experience of being teased for speaking in English and feeling intimidated when using complex sentences. Alternatively, responders who only knew English often expressed feeling separated from their identity, sometimes feeling like they were not truly Filipino. Davis and Batalova’s study, where 16 percent were Filipino out of the total 17 percent of immigrants that spoke only English at home, demonstrates a higher likelihood for Filipino immigrants to speak English primarily. This could contribute to their feelings of disassociation from their heritage and identity. These experiences highlight the impact of language proficiency on one's sense of identity and cultural belonging.

Additionally, from the data I noticed a trend among responders who do not feel that English has significantly affected their identity. Many of these individuals have grown to accept that English has been thoroughly integrated and accepted into Filipino society, viewing it as just another aspect of what makes a Filipino. Even so, this acceptance took time, as they initially viewed English as something distinctly non-Filipino. Initially, English represented a language that captured only part of their identity, leading to the feeling of something missing within themselves and their culture. Through time they described that they came to understand that “English could also belong to Filipinos, not just to Americans” or other English-speaking nations.

Though, it is difficult to overcome these ingrained beliefs in the role of English in our society. This may be why so many more people agreed than disagreed that English affected their perspective of their identities. One responder even said that they “still carry a subconscious connotation that associating English with the upper class and academia is a form of neocolonial subjugation.” This is similar to Isabel Martin’s words that “the dominance of English, particularly in elite or educational contexts, perpetuates a form of colonial mentality where English is seen as a symbol of status and power” (Martin 21). Both describe the subconscious view of English as a language of the upper class and educated rather than as a supplemental and impartial language. This is a continuation of the historical colonization of the Philippines, or in other words, the effects of linguistic imperialism on Filipinos and Filipino Americans.

My study also aligns with Macias-Williams's and Eisen, Takasaki and Tagayuna’s studies. My findings could be partially a result of Macias-Williams's findings on early exposure to English. It builds upon previous findings by revealing that English not only serves as a tool for education but also shapes how individuals view themselves and their identity. My findings are a direct parallel to Eisen, Takasaki and Tagayuna’s conclusions of colonial history influencing identity. Both showing how the effects of the past, colonization, can have a lingering impact on language, education, and sense of identity.

In conclusion, the study's main takeaways highlight that English influences the identity of both Filipinos and Filipino Americans, with diverse perspectives on its role. Showing that the effects of linguistic imperialism are still present, emphasizing the importance of understanding how our ideas about language affect how we see ourselves. Based on my findings and analyses, the data propose that the English language plays a significant role in shaping the identity of Filipinos and Filipino Americans. While some individuals feel that English clouds their sense of identity, others view it as a normal part of Filipino culture or as a language integrated into society. Nevertheless, some still view English through the lens of colonialism, seeing it as a language of the educated upper class. This demonstrates the lasting effects of linguistic imperialism on Filipinos and Filipino Americans. Ultimately, language is a reflection of ourselves and through this study, I have learned that we have the power to control how we see English in relation to our identity. As cultures grow and blend, so do our identities.

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