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*“I’m not English I-spokening!”*: Why Do Mainland Filipinos Tend to Exaggerate English Words  
Out of Humor?

**Abstract**

A prevalent type of humor in the Philippines is the mockery of the English language. This is demonstrated by either purposefully using incorrect grammar in English sentences, or deliberately mispronouncing vocabulary words. This style of humor can also come in the form of making it obvious whenever someone uses an uncommon English word, typically done in an obnoxious manner such as repeating what the initial speaker said in a more high-pitched tone. No existing research has explored the reason behind how this became a category of Filipino humor in the first place. Hence this essay attempts to provide possible answers to this research question by looking into the social position the English language holds in the Philippines, and by directly asking a few Filipinos who were raised in the country about their usage of English mockery to be humorous. Results from related literature revealed that English is viewed highly in the Philippines due to the country’s history of being one of the United States’ colonies (Manalastas 211). Additionally, responses from the interviews showed that Filipinos utilize this type of humor as a coping mechanism for the continuous ridicule they have experienced for not being as proficient as native English speakers. Simultaneously, even the more skilled English speakers in

the country are scorned due to the tendency of some Filipinos to feel envy for others' achievements, rather than celebration. However, it's important to note that their mockery of the language is also interpreted as a demonstration of their resilience; they know that they will not be able to achieve the level of fluency that western English speakers do. Though instead of facing the fact with negativity, Filipinos make jokes about the matter to maintain their positivity.

### **Introduction**

The bastardization of English words has been a prominent part of native Filipino humor. Exaggeration of the language manifests in more than one way. The main approach to it that this paper will mention is when Filipinos purposefully misspeak vocabulary words despite fully knowing their correct forms, an example being the phrases "My blood is nosing" in reference to a nosebleed and "Ispokening dollar" to allude to someone speaking in English. Another means of mocking English is by simply pointing it out whenever someone mentions a word that the one making the joke considers as clever. For example, in the sentence, "This has classist undertones." Someone could loudly point out, "UNDERTONES?!" The reason however, behind how and why mocking the English language became a component of native Filipino humor in the first place remains unexplored even by other researchers, and therefore unanswered. Thus, in an attempt to uncover the contexts of this type of humor, this paper will reference existing sources related to humor, the stance of bilingual speakers on English, and the Philippines' current view of the language. It will then highlight the perspectives of Filipinos who were born and raised in the Philippines, obtained directly from one-on-one interviews. In this way, this research essay can investigate whether this phenomenon comes from a place of communal positivity or denigration.

## Review of Related Literature

The General Verbal Theory of Humor (GVTH) presents six knowledge resources that must be included in a joke in order for it to be funny (Ruch et al. 124). One of them is language. Language “is the actual verbalization of the joke, resulting in its text. It includes all linguistic components of the text at all levels” (Ruch et al. 124). That is, not only the content of a joke, but also how it is said, influences how the audience receives the joke. It’s possible that what makes the mockery of English humorous to Filipinos is not the incorrectness of the words, but one’s tone and enunciation when they are misspeaking.

In turn, this paves the way for another argument, which is that what’s being considered the implied target of the joke is not the language itself or its western speakers, but rather the joker’s fellow Filipinos. In a study conducted in 2015, it was found that “native-like” English competence was the basis of English proficiency by bilingual speakers (Choi 72). This presents the possibility that the butchering of the English language in Filipino humor may not be a mockery towards English speakers, but actually a derogatory imitation of Filipinos who are not as fluent in the language.

These jokes can function as a means of reinforcing social hierarchies. Social theories of humor in particular argue that it also fosters an inclusionary/exclusionary nature (Ylagan 114). Oftentimes humor creates a boundary between those who are “in” the joke, those who are not, and those being targeted by the joke (Ylagan 114). The barrier itself is then constructed by various social and cultural contexts surrounding those different groups. One of the direct effects of U.S. colonial occupation in the Philippines is the requirement for English to be taught in all existing schools in the country, resulting in English proficiency as a crucial benchmark for social mobility (Manalastas 211). Combining this phenomenon with the inclusionary/exclusionary

dynamic of humor, it can be inferred that the mockery of English in Filipino humor may actually be an indirect attempt to ridicule the intelligence of Filipinos who are less proficient in the language.

At the same time however, those who have expansive vocabulary fail to be excluded in being the target of such mockery, evidenced by the joke of exaggeratedly pointing it out when someone says a “clever” or “deep” English word. An example of this is shown in a post by Twitter user Morly Kim, who quoted an English sentence before following it with laughing icons, ““I’m leaving the papers on your desk for perusal.” Perusal?? \*high-pitched\*” (Kim). Unfortunately, this possibly illustrates the community under another negative light as it demonstrates some community members’ *crab mentality*—or the tendency to be envious of others’ achievements (Billote et al. 37). This evokes the argument that the reason behind the joke is jealousy; if they’re not able to speak English well, then no one else should be able to either.

### **Methodology**

The method that was utilized for this research was an interview. This is because the main question being tackled is open-ended, thus a one-on-one interview ensured that the selected respondents had freedom over the level of depth of their answers. The interviewees were specifically Filipinos who had at least a decade-long experience of growing up in the Philippines, as the phenomenon was popularized within the country’s residents and not among the diaspora. Additionally, the interviewees requested to remain anonymous, hence they will be referred to as “respondents” throughout this paper.

The following questions were asked to the selected respondents:

1. How much social value do you think does the Philippines place on the English language?

2. Are you able to observe the presence of this English-mocking type of humor among the native Filipino community?
3. Do you partake in that type of humor as well?
4. Why do you think that type of humor is so funny to the native Filipino community?
5. How do you think did mocking English ultimately become a style of humor among native Filipinos in the first place?

It's also important to note that a limitation of this research is bias resulting from which specific area in the Philippines the respondents were raised in. Due to the Philippines being an archipelago instead of a single piece of land like the majority of other countries, it hosts over 100 ethnolinguistic groups, and therefore over 100 cultures. Consequently, one respondent's perspective of the context behind the phenomenon can be vastly different from another respondent's due to differing cultures. This poses the limitation of the results not being generalizable to the target population.

When the selected native Filipinos were invited for an in-person meeting to provide their insight into this topic, they were in collective agreement that the Philippines does indeed place the English language on a pedestal. One respondent mentioned that due to its history of being occupied by three different nations, one of them being the United States, Filipinos have been conditioned to follow a colonial mentality. That is, they began perceiving parts of their culture as inferior compared to that of America's, evidenced by how English is the language primarily used both for written and verbal education unless the class is explicitly stated to be a Filipino subject. This then led to the Filipinos' tendency to subconsciously view those who are proficient in English as "more educated and luxurious" than those who are not. In their response, the interviewee explains that "The notion is that you're more "educated" if you're proficient in

English. Especially if you don't have an accent, you appear high class." They continue with their point by bringing up the fact that due to the elevated view of English, many Filipino children in the country now grow up speaking English instead of one of the Philippines' native languages. The respondent also mentioned that the concept of the "American Dream" plays a part as well. According to Roxanne Lynn Doty, Filipinos were viewed by imperial America as closer to animal than man, they were "in need of guidance, tutoring, and uplifting" and ultimately "incapable of exercising agency" (qtd. Webb 10). This infantilization by America towards the Filipinos may be a factor of how post-colonial Philippines was groomed to believe that one *must* leave the Philippines to achieve success, hence fluency in what's considered to be the universal language is crucial.

Another respondent brought up globalization and policy as the reason why English education is firmly enforced in Philippine schools; more specifically, the government making exportation of labor as one of the pillars that the country's economy relies on. As though wanting to advertise Filipinos as the ideal high-supply workers to foreign nations, the use of English is actively imposed in the majority of institutions in the country.

Once they were asked about the butchering—colloquially speaking—of English words as part of the community's humor, though all of them partake in those jokes, the respondents had varying answers as to why. One had a rather positive insight, explaining that the jokes demonstrate the people's ability to find comedic relief even within the worst situations, given the country's history of being victimized by not only colonizers, but constant natural disasters as well. Filipinos acknowledge that mistakes are inevitable, and even very common, when speaking a language different from their mother tongue. However, instead of dwelling on that gap from native speakers, they make jokes about it instead to perpetuate positivity. The respondent

maintained the same reasoning for exaggeratedly pointing it out when someone speaks in clever English. That type of joke is made by the initiator as an effort to mask knowing that the target of the punchline is a better English communicator than them; instead of being envious, they turn the situation into something funny.

Meanwhile, another respondent viewed the phenomenon as having negative roots, referring to it as a defense mechanism. “Instead of getting made fun of for speaking with incorrect grammar, you laugh along and make the joke first,” they state to expound on how the humor comes from a place of defensiveness. Additionally, mocking the English communication skills of those who are less fluent in the language occurred too frequently, to the point that it had become normalized, which then translated to purposely butchering sentences as a means of humor. As for why Filipinos find it funny to poke fun at those who speak English a little too well, the respondent mentioned that it may have roots in *smart-shaming*, which is “the act of shaming (by mocking) someone who appears to be smart or smarter than others” (Biana 173).

### **Results and Discussion**

The answers obtained from the conducted interview are significant as they support the points mentioned earlier in the paper. The respondents, who were each raised in the Philippines for years ranging from 8 to 16, directly observed how high the pedestal the country places English on and how those who are not as proficient are shamed. Furthermore, one of the responses evidenced the implication of the crab mentality within the “humorous” bastardization of the language, as the mindset is essentially present through smart-shaming. It is significant however, to note that there may be positive facets to these jokes as well, such as that it is a demonstration of resilience. Instead of dwelling on being unable to achieve the level of English fluency that their foreign counterparts have, Filipinos cope through laughter.

## **Conclusion**

What may be a form of humor to an entire community may actually be a symbol of both resilience and envy. Filipinos have an intrinsic want to completely assimilate to the ideologies taught to them via American occupation, evidenced by English proficiency being a marker of social mobility. Unfortunately, the community's members are unable to reach equal levels of proficiency, thus leading to derogation and jealousy that each show through mockery of others. Due to how normalized these combinations of positive and negative behaviors have become in Philippine society, Filipinos have integrated jokes referencing them as a core component of the community's overall humor.



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