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Research Article

Unequal Englishes in the Linguistic Landscape: Tracing Desires, Ideologies and Class through Public Signs

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Unequal Englishes is a critical approach to the study of the twin processes of the pluralization and globalization of English which essentially argues that the Englishes of the world--with the ideologies and practices that go along with them--are unequally valued. This paper is one of the very few studies thus far which explores the mechanisms and configurations of Unequal Englishes in the linguistic landscape. It examines the linguistic landscape of multilingual Cubao in the Philippines, a highly urbanized center of economic and cultural activity in the country. It shows that amidst the seemingly chaotic structure of interactions and movements of people, the public signs organize how such interactions and movements are mobilized, and they do so along historically shaped class and ideological lines. English has globalized, localized, and pluralized, but is not 'English' but unequal Englishes which configure the shape of relations between people on the ground.

Keywords: linguistic landscape; multilingualism; politics of language; translingual; unequal Englishes

1. INTRODUCTION

Several scholars have in recent years contended that work on the pluralization and localization of English should pay more attention to the centrality of power and inequality in the distribution and mobilization of the Englishes of the world (Dovchin et al., 2016; Kubota, 2015; Park, 2015). They operate on the assumption that while localized Englishes are culturally and linguistically legitimate, they are not equally valued in and by society. Thus, by training our lenses on inequalities of Englishes, we may be able to alert ourselves to the continuing struggles of marginalized and minoritized users of English who are mocked, devalued and/or silenced because of the kind of English they speak or use (Berowa, 2024; Bin Rashed, 2023; Chowdhury, 2024; Morikawa & Parba, 2022; Sabaté-Dalmau, 2018; Salonga, 2015). According to Pennycook et al. (2017), when it comes to the question of pluralization or indigenization of English, "what we really need to address are the questions of unequal Englishes" (p. xiv).

This article responds to the call for more work which centers on "inequalities that exist amongst Englishes, English users, and languages including English" (Kubota, 2015, p. 35), but in the context of Linguistic Landscape studies where only a few studies around the world have thus far mobilized the lens of Unequal Englishes (Higgins, 2015; Pan,

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2015). More specifically, this article traces class and ideological configurations mobilized by unequal Englishes in translingual public spaces. It does so by analysing the linguistic landscape of Cubao, a highly urbanized commercial place at the heart of Metro Manila, Philippines.

Thus, this paper operates on two fundamental assumptions about English in local contexts. First, its plural(ized) forms are realized as unequal Englishes; that is, there are many sub-national iterations in the use of English in local contexts, and these are embedded in class-shaped social relations and historically-formed ideologies. Because such social relations are characterized by power dynamics, the producers of the language also mobilize different Englishes which index and affirm the various forms of inequalities in these relations of power.

Second, these unequal Englishes are embedded in the translingual repertoires of communities of speakers. These Englishes do not operate in a social vacuum but in social spaces where language use produces unique configurations of ideologies and identities precisely because of the way different languages, dialects and accents with their associated meanings, ideologies and histories are entangled. It is true that English is embedded in translingual practices – a point correctly made by many scholars (Pennycook, 2020) -- but this article aims to show that the 'language' continues to configure distinctive meanings and ideologies which mobilize how speakers speak and relate to one another even within translingual spaces.

The object of analysis of this study – which is broadly framed within the field of Linguistic Landscapes as a sociolinguistic study – is public signage. It refers to signs (all meaning-making texts) outside and inside establishments which are accessible to the general public. This means that these signs do not only reflect particular uses of language (and thus particular configurations of language politics in the Philippines), but, more importantly, they co-construct or co-produce 'space' imbued with all sorts of meanings (Pennycook, 2008) alongside people who must affirm or assert their existence through it (Lefebvre, 1991). Public 'places' are thus socially constructed 'spaces,' because it is through such signage that users or producers of language display and perform identities, ideologies, and language practices.

This sociolinguistics of multilingualism aims to track layers of relationships between languages and their speakers (Shohamy & Gorter, 2008). More specifically, it explores "the complexities of multilingualism in terms of competing values ascribed to languages, the embedded multimodal features of public signs reflecting conditions of the community, as well as the sentiments of the makers of these public signs" (Doroja-Cadiente & Valdez, 2019, p. 35). The street signs then separately and together facilitate various forms of interaction – symbolic and material in nature – between people who occupy and produce the space in which they become or affirm who they are vis-à-vis each other.

2. THE CONTEXT OF THE SIGNS

2.1 The Philippines as a Multilingual Country

Much has been written about the Philippines as a multilingual country and the various language wars which have animated the nation throughout the 20th century (Gonzalez, 1980; Tupas, 2015). This paper will not rehearse all the details about these language and language policy debates, but there are major points that need to be highlighted in order to help us make sense of our analysis and discussion later in the article.

While the Philippines is indeed a multilingual nation, with easily more than 100 languages spoken across the archipelago, 20th century language policy has been dominated by four 'milestones' as far as language politics is concerned. These are: (1) the imposition of English as the sole medium of instruction in the first decades of American colonial rule which began during the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902 (Constantino, 1970); (2) the installation of Tagalog (among other contending Philippine languages such as Bisaya) as the national language in the 1930s (Gonzalez, 1980); (3) the institutionalization of bilingual education in English and Tagalog [renamed Pilipino to de-ethnicize the language) in 1974 (Gonzalez, 1980; Sibayan & Gonzalez, 1996), and the recent institutionalization of Mother tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in the first three years of formal education (Metila et al., 2016). Therefore, while the Philippines may be described as multilingual, its language policy historically has been hugely reductive, with very little space given to languages other than English and Tagalog in the educational system. Consequently, supported by the combined forces and conditions of neoliberal globalization and coloniality (Hsu, 2015; Schirmer & Shalom, 1987), English has remained the most symbolically dominant language in the country, while Tagalog in the form of the national language maintains its status as the major inter-regional lingua franca (Lorente, 2013; Sibayan & Gonzalez, 1996; Taya, 2010).

2.2 Cubao as the Immediate Socioeconomic-Ideological Context

Cubao is a dizzyingly busy commercial center which historically has undergone massive socioeconomic transformations. From afar or superficially, it hosts a dynamic congregation of stores ranging from megamalls to small stalls and including street vending activities. It is a place where informal economic activities compete for space with more formal business establishments including globally recognizable trademarks and fast-food chains. Everyday people pass through the streets and alleys of Cubao to get on buses and trains to places within and outside Metro Manila.

I first collected photos of street signs of Cubao when I went back to Manila for one month in 2012 to work with graduate students at a university nearby. Every day I would pass through Cubao after getting off the train and walk towards the jeepney that would

take me to the university. This was then an opportunity for me to reconnect with Cubao, where I had spent most of my time as a university student in Manila and which I would visit occasionally whenever I would be in the Philippines. More photos were taken in 2014 when once again I had the opportunity to teach graduate students in the same university.

On both occasions, I would eat my lunch in Cubao every day and walk around to observe more keenly everyday movements of people and how they would interact with public signs around them (Figure 1). For three days in May 2017, I visited Cubao again to check on the signs and see whether there were major changes to the patterns of signs I had observed earlier. I did the same thing for two days in May 2019. I saw no major alterations to the public spaces which would merit an overhaul of my critical appraisal of the place and the configurations of signs embedded in it.

Figure 1. The author one day in Cubao

2.3 The Semiotic Structure of Cubao

As mentioned earlier, Cubao is a dizzyingly busy place. However, there is some structure to the dynamic of everyday life in Cubao, a point that will be useful in making sense of the place's linguistic landscape. At the center of Cubao is the famed Araneta Coliseum which not too long ago was the biggest indoor stadium in the Philippines. Around the

coliseum are wide facades of well-known restaurants, where one can also soak in the ambiance of local street life represented in open spaces around the coliseum through a long line of Filipino food vendors. There are streets fronting big malls accessible only by private cars; there are bookstores, a church, and more restaurants. The center of Cubao exhibits semblances of *sites of luxury* (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009)—there one finds restricted spaces with highly regulated public signage featuring formal use of official language(s) (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). In these sites, the use of English "constitutes prestigious symbolic capital, as opposed to the local Englishes of peripheral economies" (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009, p. 367) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. 'Authorized English'

As one walks further away from the center, spaces become less luxurious, streets turn into alleys, and people move about with little physical space in between bodies. In fact, on the fringes or margins of Cubao one finds informal economic activities (some of which are illegal) which sell low-priced second-hand or fake 'branded' products, as well as cheap food and other services (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Narrow alleys and informal sale of cheap clothes

Figure 4. Shoe sale on the fringes of Cubao

The lives of some groups of families revolve around these economic activities as well, while commuters who pass through these alleys are looking for cheap daily necessities or else have no private vehicles which will help them find alternative ways to get to their destination. The fringes of Cubao are characterized by "a circumscribed, task-oriented (production) network of necessity…where the signage is manually produced on a unique basis with a relatively modest economic investment and fashioned out of materials that do not weather well" (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009, p. 373) (Figure 5). This part of Cubao deploys public signage using Tagalog words in baseline Tagalog syntax but peppered with English words. Here we see sign producers assuming engagement with consumers who are comfortable with the local language as well as with English words ('bags', 'fitting room') which have become part and parcel of the local ecology of language use.

Thus, while Figure 2 mobilizes the "officially sanctioned use of English" (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009, p. 372), Figure 5 draws upon translingual use which indexes informality and responds primarily to the "immediacy of task-interaction" (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009, p. 373). An explanation of their varying ideological and class trajectories will be given later in the article.

Figure 5. 'Bringing bags to the fitting room is not allowed'

Beyond the inner circle of Cubao, we encounter signage which does not merely feature marginalized language forms; beyond the inner circle we have 'sites of implosion' or 'ambiguity' (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009) where we see overlapping patterns of

language use. Similar to Figure 5, some signs are Tagalog-dominant with a few insertions of English; on the other hand, the language of choice in many signs is still English but featuring a much wider range of forms affirming or departing from the standard ones. There are signs which are clearly industrially produced and are tightly edited, as well as signs that aim to address people's needs beyond everyday concerns of survival. But there are also signs which are less permanent and are clearly produced to address immediate concerns and problems. Cubao being a public space, smaller but legitimate stall owners perpetually compete for space with daily commuters who also have other concerns other than business or commercial ones. In other words, the distinction between the commercial and the personal in sites of implosion or ambiguity is blurred; public signage showcases a wider range of voices—voices from store owners, their employees, targeted customers, as well as the general public. These voices could be gleaned through the manner by which they communicate or interact with one another.

3. THE UNEVEN SPREAD OF ENGLISH

It must be highlighted, however, that the choice of English in these sites of implosion requires some ideological and sociopolitical unpacking. Historically, English has taken root in the lives of Filipinos not simply because it has become the language of intimacy and informality, thus signaling its cultural rootedness in everyday life, but because it has become the language of power since it was imposed on the Filipino people at the onset of American colonialism in the first decade of the 20th century (Constantino, 1970; Lorente, 2013). The 'choice' in this sense is a historically conditioned choice which divests individuals of a great amount of opportunity to configure their own communicative repertoires (Tollefson, 1986). Agentive, creative, and resistive language use may be a postcolonial phenomenon (Kachru, 1986) but such use is imbricated in structures and conditions of power which distribute the material and symbolic resources of society unequally across communities of speakers (Tupas, 2019; Valdez, 2011). Thus, it is one thing to argue for the need to learn and use English in order to access it as a language of power and social mobility, but it is another thing to ask who learns and uses English that is highly valued by society, as opposed to English that is mocked or devalued. For the latter group of English users, they are persistently subjected to "language stereotypes and discriminatory remarks" (Guinto, 2014, p. 76) and are objects, to borrow Guinto's words, of "comic relief."

English, in other words, is not just a localized and pluralized language which can be captured by an idealized 'Philippine English', but its various iterations (Gonzales, 2017; Poras-Piorac, 2019) are unequally valued, and their speakers unequally socially positioned as well (Canilao, 2020; Guinto, 2023; Pefianco Martin, 2014; Tupas, 2019; Tupas & Salonga, 2016). Consequently, the use of 'English' in the Philippines translates to the mobilization of unequal Englishes, thus putting the spotlight "on the unequal ways and situations in which Englishes are arranged, configured, and contested" (Tupas

& Rubdy, 2015, p. 3). We see how such Englishes are arranged in Figure 6 below. This sign was produced by a store along the street which demarcates the public Cubao, where the signs are emplaced (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), and private Cubao just across the street where private residences and properties compete for space.

Figure 6. Arrangement of Englishes

The store offers the services as shown on the biggest sign in the picture. However, superimposed upon this are two temporary signs produced by employees of the store. The language of the 'No Parking!!' actually appears all over Cubao, but what makes this remarkable is its temporary and in-the-moment interactive character. It provides evidence of the urgency and importance of addressing the problem of taxi drivers parking in front of the store, as this blocks the flow of foot traffic. Competition for space in Cubao, as mentioned earlier, is quite acute, and this prompts property owners to issue reminders and even warnings to the general public through signs, which are produced many times, as if one is not enough. This is, in fact, what Peckson (2014) refers to as 'proximal repetition' of the signs in the linguistic landscape of Cubao, mobilized by property owners who perceive 'intrusions' into their own private spaces. But for this particular 'No parking' sign, the need to put up this personalized written/printed reminder was apparently due to the repetitive transgressions of taxi drivers; instead of verbally confronting them, the sign was put up.

This is the social pragmatic context of the signs in question, and we see this working more acutely in the meaning-making production of the sign 'comport room.' Even with clear information about the store's offered services, people ask the store if they can use its toilet. The sign aims to lead people to a public toilet further down the road, but it is clear here that the sign – temporary, highly contextualized, highly immediate – constructs a personalized relationship between store employees and the people who seek such information. The word 'comport' is written as if it is spoken. There is no voiceless labiodental fricative sound /f/ in most Philippine languages, thus pronouncing it 'correctly' (i.e., 'comfort') would most likely have been learned formally in school. Research, in fact, has consistently affirmed this observation of Filipinos having difficulty distinguishing between /p/ and /f/ (Poras-Piorac, 2019; Tayao, 2004), with [b], [p] and [f] found to be allophones (or interchangeably used) in the production of /v/ (Guinto, 2014). This explains why well-meaning teachers spend time drilling students to help the latter pronounce both sounds 'correctly'. Being able to differentiate between 'p' and 'f' is a hallmark of being formally educated (Tayao, 2004). In fact, the inability to do so historically has been used as a source of ridicule and social commentary, with many Filipinos in politics, business, beauty pageants and, of course, in education, losing credibility because of their inability to discriminate between the two sounds. This was one of the phonological 'errors' of Janina San Miguel, a beauty title holder, whose answer during the interview portion was mocked and remains an unfortunate iconic representation of what Filipinos consider as bad English (Tupas, 2013). The negative press that followed her when she won the title eventually led to her relinquishing her crown.

Thus, 'comport,' while not a so-called 'proper' way to use English, could be more authentic-sounding to a particular group of Filipino speakers given the kind of interactional relationship being constructed by the store workers with particular groups of people who are made to 'listen' to the sign. It is a particular use of English mediated by first-language phonology, an oracy-driven, rather than literacy-driven, written language use in public spaces which could be traced back to a largely passive learning and experience of English among a large section of Philippine society. Such 'English' use does not only evidence a marginalized trajectory of English literacy development in the country, but also implicates specific interlocking everyday life practices and conditions.

4. FRAMING UNEQUAL ENGLISHES IN THE MULTILINGUAL LANDSCAPE

The highly durable politics of language in the Philippines can be aptly described as constitutive of "inequalities of multilingualism" (Tupas, 2015). Despite having been displaced on paper by the national language of Filipino and the country's many mother tongues, English remains the most powerful language both symbolically and materially as result of the institutionalization of bilingual and multilingual forms of education. Just

as the Philippines is a highly multilingual country, so is Cubao, especially because it is a major point of entry from and departure for different provinces and regions of the country. However, with the exception English and—to some extent—Tagalog-based Filipino (the national language), all Philippine languages are marginalized. In fact, they are generally silenced in public signage in Cubao, indicating how in the public imagination and the official discourse of policies and policy-making they are they are only given nominal or token attention. The ideology of desire in a highly commercial complex is closely associated with English. Thus Cubao, despite catering to a wide range of consumers using a range of languages and coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds, chooses English to communicate and interact with those who pass through its malls, streets and alleys. This does not mean that it is all English in its linguistic landscapes; indeed, there is the use of Filipino as well, but insertions of English into Filipino reveal much about how English has seeped into the local linguistic repertoire and is deployed within socially conditioned choices of language use.

Thus, what we see here is another layer of linguistic distribution, one that transcends the distribution of so-called 'languages' constituting what we casually refer to as 'multilingualism.' Rather, it is a distribution that implicates the uneven spread of Englishes along class lines. Socioeconomic transformations in the Philippines have cemented the status of English as arguably the country's most powerful language. It has been the object of nationalist ire for decades following the country's political independence from the United States in the 1940s, but the continued advance of capitalist globalization has affirmed, and in fact intensified, the propagation of ideologies about English as superior, desirable and as the great social equalizer (Lorente, 2013; Tupas, 2015; Valdez, 2011). These socioeconomic transformations have resulted in different English-based linguistic configurations, bringing people from different socioeconomic backgrounds into one 'place' but also into unequal yet interlocking life trajectories. People from all walks of life converge in and diverge from Cubao but are confronted by and interact with different Englishes in the public space. No one has exclusive access to any of these configurations of English language use, but they are certainly interpellated into subject positions (Althusser, 1972).

Another way of framing English in the linguistic landscape of Cubao is to account for the multiple ways to differentiate a public sign in grammatically correct English and another expressed in Filipino with English insertions. The first one (Figure 2) takes on a voice of authority that is not limited simply to one stall owner, while the second one (Figure 5) only addresses those who enter one particular store. For the first, all those who pass and make their way through the market where the sign can be found are targeted, and these include a wide range of people from all walks of life who go to the market or pass through it to get to the malls, offices, parking lots, and even the huge coliseum where big national and international concerts and other high profile events are held. It must be noted that one gets to this area in Cubao from the MRT (train) station and parking lots, thus some people do not really have a choice, especially if faced with the infamous Manila traffic.

There is considerable time and effort poured into producing signs like this because not only do they require editing work before they get put up, but their material (compared with that of signs similar to the sign in Figure 5) is sturdier, thus pointing to "considerable material and economic investment" (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009, p. 372). The sign in Figure 5, on the other hand, is obviously more limited in reach because it only targets those who enter the store, which is actually on the fringes of Cubao, and which sells *ukay-ukay* or second-hand clothes at extremely low prices. Thus, the readers of the sign are assumed to be those with "relatively low incomes" (Abueg, 2005, p. 55)who are more comfortable speaking and being addressed in Tagalog-based Filipino (or perhaps other Philippine languages too, although here the Tagalog-based national language, Filipino, may be the unmarked language because Manila is dominantly Tagalog-speaking) and who tend to bring their bags inside the fitting rooms. The making of the sign seems premised on the belief of the sign producer (perhaps based on experience) that bags have been used for store theft. In bigger stalls, especially in malls, there is typically no such sign where fitting rooms are used due to the presence of security cameras.

The use of English words in the sign, however, is not surprising here. The words 'bags' and 'fitting rooms' are no longer foreign words but staple words in Filipino consumerism. They are part of the "English lexicon [which] has been embraced and appropriated extensively to suit numerous functional and symbolic purposes" (Manan et al., 2017, p. 661). Thus, although English is used, it does not primarily project a trans-local desire to bridge the local and the global in terms of aspirations and identities, a point that is usually raised or highlighted by scholars when describing mixes between English and local languages in economically vibrant places (Manan et al., 2017; Adetunji, 2015). Rather, its use is local through and through as the sign attempts to communicate a local message to a narrowly defined group of consumers whose deployment of their linguistic repertoire is "highly contextualized in the immediacy of task-interaction" (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009, p. 373). In short, the different configurations of English language use in the two signs evoke "different types of interactional orders" especially as they are located in "sites of different dignity" (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009, p. 366).

5. CONCLUSION

While multilingual practices due to the twin processes of globalization and localization have amplified the fluidity of language use in real speech and made it difficult to account for separate languages (Pennycook, 2020), Cubao's linguistic landscape constructs English as a socially multifaceted language which, as the so-called global language, brings people together in different levels of conversation and engagement through the various ways it is deployed. These multilingual practices are not equally distributed among their users such that everyone has a fair chance at deploying the symbolic and 'real' power of particular privileged practices. Dovchin et al. (2016) alert us to the need

to focus on “linguistically mixed practices of speakers in late modernity,” but they insist that work in the area of translingual Englishes “can be enhanced through a stronger focus on ‘unequal Englishes’” (p. 93). In their own research, Dovchin et al. (2016) show how English is indeed “unequally distributed within the translingual practices of young speakers who have different access and use of linguistic resources according to their cultural, regional and socio-economic background” (p. 4).

In the case of this paper, however, ‘speakers’ are those apprehended through voices that mobilize unequal Englishes in public signage, as well as affirm social positionings of people who are drawn towards particular dispositions and lifestyles. ‘Speakers’ are also those who consume unequal Englishes as they choose to enter or not enter stores and other public spaces. Public signage in Cubao (in the inner and outer circles) generally can be assumed to deploy English as a global and local lingual franca, as people as consumers expect and are expected to interact with it in their everyday commute. However, reconfiguring the signage according to what kind of English is used and why, we can perhaps more appropriately refer to unequal Englishes which communicate class-driven desires, ideologies, and conditions. To say it in another way, the spread of English even within the same geopolitical and economic space continues to be uneven, thus the various uses of the language “exhibit fundamentally different characteristics with regard to their forms, their designs and their arrangements”, showcasing the “unique social aspirations and the social domination and subordination of each community” (Pan, 2015, p. 163).

Indeed, English has globalized, localized, and pluralized, but situated within specific spaces of language use; it arranges unequal relations between people along historically formed class lines. This is the story of unequal Englishes in Cubao, Philippines; this is, in fact, the story of unequal Englishes in multilingual contexts around the world, such as Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2024), China (Pan, 2015), Hong Kong (Lee & Jenks, 2019), India (Highet, 2023), Japan (Morikawa & Parba, 2022), Kuwait (Bin Rashed, 2023), Singapore (Lu, 2023), South Korea (Park, 2015), and Spain (Sabaté-Dalmau, 2018).

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