Multilingual wordplay in a Tagalog text

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Goal and Background of the Study

This paper analyzes a passage of text from a Tagalog novel written by the noted Tagalog novelist and poet, Amado V. Hernandez. The excerpt depicts festive teenagers at a wake who play a traditional game for amusement (See Sanford & Eder, 1984). During the course of the game, the participants unwittingly find themselves in a situation of multilingual wordplay. The sources of the humor are not immediately apparent to readers who are unfamiliar with Kapampangan. This analysis will show how humor is accomplished through the interaction.

A broader question that is addressed in this paper is what makes something funny in U.S. dominant culture, underclass cultures, Tagalog culture or any other culture? More specifically, are criteria which might be identified for humor in U.S. culture or Tagalog culture transferable to understanding humor in other cultures? Do people laugh at the same things across cultures? (See Ferro & Gabriella, 1986 and Haig, 1988 for a further discussion.) An important element of humor in U.S. culture is deprecation of self or others. A second important source of humor is sexual connotation. Phonemic substitution can be a third source of humor. Very often in the United States, humor based on deprecation borders on the demeaning (e.g., jokes which belittle women such as mother-in-law jokes, jokes which belittle ethnic groups, and jokes which justifiably castigate politicians for excesses). Can we correctly assume that what is funny in Ann Arbor or Ithaca will also be funny in Manila or Baguio and that joke schemata will be the same across cultures?

In contrast to U.S. culture, other cultures which value what Brown and Levinson (1978) describe as "negative face", can find both self and other-deprecation to be problematic as a source of humor. In cultures which place a high priority on face-sensitivity in interaction, other-deprecation would be
unthinkable while self-deprecation is the expected norm for ordinary social interaction. It is important to ask whether conventions for ordinary interaction are suspended for playful interaction. What mechanisms do interactants typically use to signal to one another that they are playing rather than serious? Are these mechanisms the same across cultures or different? In general, though, in cultures which observe a high degree of face-sensitivity, self-deprecation and avoidance of other-deprecation become matters of serious observance.

Self-deprecation and avoidance of other-deprecation are generally the norms of acceptable behavior for speakers of Tagalog. However, several studies suggest that these interpersonal norms are suspended in many contexts including cross gender teasing and ethnolinguistic stereotyping. For example, David Zorc, in the most recent issue of the *Philippine Journal of Linguistics* (June 1990) shows how various phonetic processes characterizing Tagalog slang can result in humor. Pablo and Gardner (1987), in a study employing semantic differential scales, found that Tagalog adults and children have a clear consensus for both positive and negative stereotypes about Ilocanos while they have much less agreement on stereotypes for their own ethnolinguistic group. This clarity of agreement on how rival ethnic groups might be characterized is not really surprising considering the nature of stereotypes.

The second source of humor that is identified—sexual innuendo—is also a common source of humor in Tagalog. In fact, "green jokes," as they are called, are prevalent in Manila, and I might add, parenthetically, it has been my own experience, in dealing with educated Filipinos, that the opportunity to make a sexual innuendo is rarely missed (e.g. condominiums is shortened to "condoms," Datsun becomes a punch line "dat soon?" "election" is intentionally mispronounced as "erection," and I've always wondered what Filipinos thought of "Kiki" Mondale, etc.). Jokes with sexual connotations are called green jokes-- perhaps because they are off-color. (Lillian Garcia (1976) has written about "green jokes" in Cebuano.)

As might be expected, in a multilingual setting like Manila, jokes based on phonemic substitution across languages are a common source of humor. A typical Manileno might be from Ternate, be married to an Ilocana, live in Manila and conduct work life in English. This person could be
expected to code mix with Ternateno, Iloco, Tagalog, and English. Numerous studies document multilingual code switching in Manila (see Bautista). Paralleling the pantun tradition of Malaysia, Filipinos have an indigenous versification tradition represented in the Balagtasan. The Balagtasan is a poetic joust in which one of the competitors is recognized as victor by the audience. It is less like poetry and more like rap. The verse is long, extemporaneous, with clever images and puns, and it generally includes social satire. The competitors intentionally try to outdo each other in their turns at versification. In a context which values and admires wordplay, coupled with a multilingual setting which promotes code switching, the situation is ripe for phonetic substitution among languages as a source of humor.

TEXT AND ANALYSIS
The Huwego-de-prenda: 'Game of Ceding Tokens'

1. May nagmungkahi na ang mga kabataan
existential suggested LIG PL youths

ay magdaos ng huwego de prenda.
INVERSION hold game of tokens

Someone suggested to the young people that they hold a huwego-de-prenda.

The huwego-de-prenda is a game something like strip poker that used to be played typically at wakes in the Philippines. (Graduate students who worked as my linguistic informants in the early 1980s knew about this game but had never played it.) The game follows one of two scenarios: the king loses his ring in the sea and solicits help in finding it; or the king's pet bird or butterfly escapes and he asks for help. The king calls upon participants to help him find the lost item and the participant is expected to answer with the required response formula. The point of the game is to catch someone who is not paying attention and who hesitates in delivering the formulaic answer. The inattentive individual must cede a personal token like a slipper, a ring, or a shawl or alterately sing, play the guitar or recite poetry in front of the group. The
name of the game is borrowed from Spanish "juwego de prenda." The text continues:

2. **Ayoko di 'ko marunong kumanta**
   dislike NEG I know sing

   **tanggi ng isang dalaginding.**
   said one young woman

One girl said of the juwego-de-prenda, "I don't want to play because I can't sing."

3. **Di sumayaw ka kung maprendahan**
   NEG dance you if get token

   **payo ng katabi.**
   advise one beside

"Why not dance instead for your punishment?" advised the person sitting beside the reluctant girl.

4. **Malay kong magsayaw!**
   know I-LIG dance

"What do I know about dancing!"

5. **Mag-striptease ka.**
   do strip tease you

"You can do a strip-tease!" someone suggested.

6. **Walang hiya at hinampas ng abaniko**
   no have modesty CONJ hit fan

   **ang manunudy'o.**
   the teaser

"You're shameless!" she said as she slapped the one teasing her with her fan.

Lines two through six illustrate the kind of teasing that is common in cross-gender dyadic interaction in Tagalog. Teasing suspends usual face observance and allows the inclusion of sexual mention which might ordinarily be taboo.