

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.¹ 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 substitution² 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**³ 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 alternately 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 huwego-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 manunudyo.
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.

It would be generally unthinkable to suggest an acquaintance, especially of the opposite sex, do a striptease in any other polite social context. The *huwego-de-prenda* allows the frolicking young people to take some verbal liberties with one another and to make suggestive remarks with minimal consequences.

7. **Pinagkaisahan nila kung sino ang magiging hari**
 be one they COND who become king

napili ang isang binatang mukhang panakot-bayakan
 chose one young man face scare bats

na nakasabit sa balag ng upo.
 LIG hang on trellis of squash

They all agreed to select as king of the *huwego-de-prenda* a young man with a face so ugly that it could scare bats away from upo squash hanging on a trellis.

8. **Pangit namang hari 'yan,**
 ugly so king that

pansin ng isang dalagang kasali.
 uttered one young woman player

"But the king is so ugly!" uttered one of the female participants.

9. **Anong kuwento ng hari**
 what role king

kundi katatakutan pakli ng katabi.
 if not cause fear said one beside

"What's the purpose of a king if not to inspire fear?" quipped one person from the sidelines.

These lines illustrate the good-natured teasing that characterizes the *huwego-de-prenda*. Notice the many levels of fear suggested in use of the Tagalog word **takot**--creepy fear from the bat, to Gothic fear from the Frankenstein image of the ugly king, to awe inspired by legitimate positional authority all

encapsulated in the morpheme **takot**. The game begins in earnest but the teasing tone continues.

10. **Umupo ang hari sa likod ng mesang parisukat**
 sat king at back of table square

at nagsimula.
 CONJ begin

The king sat down behind a square table and he began.

11. **Tumahimik muna kayong lahat**
 be quiet first you all

para magkarinigan hiniling niya.
 for hear request he

"Please everyone be quiet so that we can all hear one another," the king requested.

12. **Handa na ba kayo?**
 ready now QUESTION you all

"Is everyone ready?"

13. **Kanina pa.**
 earlier still

"We've been ready for a long time."

14. **Nakawala ang paruparo ng hari**
 escape butterfly of king

at dumapo sa bulaklak ng hasmin.
 CONJ alighted on flower of jasmine

"The king's butterfly got away and it landed on the jasmine flower," said the king.

- 15a. **H'wala sa'asmin ma'al na'ari.**
 there not at jasmine beloved LIG king

**** The correctly pronounced Tagalog should read:

- 15b. **Wala sa hasmin mahal na hari.**

"It's not at the jasmine, your highness," said the jasmine.

On the surface line 15a seems to be just an alternate pronunciation for the underlying correct Tagalog pronunciation as represented in 15b. The only apparent difference is the phonetic alternation between /h/ and /ʔ/. This difference between aspirate /h/ and glottal stop turns out to be a phonemic difference between Tagalog and Kapampangan. In Tagalog, the word "**hari**" means king while "**ari**" literally means property but it is regularly used to refer to genitals. (I don't know if it means male, female or both.) It is clear from the following lines that the jasmine's substitution of /ʔari/ for /hari/ is not intentional humor. We can assume that the jasmine is a second-language Tagalog speaker because of this mistake.

14. **Inipit ng ilang kalapit ang pagtawa**
 hold many near laughter

nang mahalatang ang hasmin ay
 when notice jasmine INVERSION PARTICLE

isang binibining hindi taal na tagaroon.
 a young woman NEG native from there

Those nearby tried to stifle their laughter when they noticed that the girl was not from there.

15. **Sa'naron tanong ng hari.**
 where ask king

"Where is it?" said the king.

16. **Nasa ari po.**
 on king POLITENESS
 **** The correct Tagalog should read
 Nasa hari po.

"On the king." (but literally "on the genitals")

17. **Ipinalo ng hari ang kanyang palad sa mesa**
 banged king his fist on table
 at sinabing hindi ipinahihintulot
 CONJ said not permitted

na labanan ang hari.
 LIG oppose king

The king banged his fist on the table and said that players in the game were not supposed to oppose the king.

18. **Yan ang regla aniya.**
 DEICTIC rules said

"Those are the rules," he said.

19. **Tumutol ang hasmin at nangatwiran.**
 disagreed jasmine CONJ argued

The jasmine disagreed and argued.

20. **Hano hiyan atol-ari tanong niya.**
 INTER DEICTIC judgment king ask she
 **** She means to say in the correct Tagalog.
Ano iyan hatol-hari tanong niya.

"What's that, a royal decree?" she asked.

21. **Sa hamin sa Halapit laat kait ari'y indi sagrado.**
 at ours in Halapit all even king not sacred
 **** The correct Tagalog for this is:
Sa amin sa Alapit lahat kahit hari'y hindi sagrado.

"At home in Alapit, all, even kings, are not sacred."

22. **Hayoko na at dumadabog na tumindig.**
 not like and grumbled LIG stood up
 **** The correct Tagalog should read:
Ayoko na at dumadabog na tumindig.

"I don't like this," she grumbled as she got up to leave.

The poor jasmine unintentionally has ended up talking about genitals instead of kings. It is clear to her though that she has become the object of ridicule by the other teenagers who guffaw each time she speaks. The writer, Amado Hernandez, is basing humor in this passage on ethnolinguistic stereotyping. Pampangans are represented as country bumpkins who end up saying dirty words because of their

phonetic preferences in their mother tongue which become scatalogical substitutions when they are speaking Tagalog. It just so happens that this phonetic accident makes them the object of ridicule in Tagalog.

Wordplay with English

After the jasmine storms out, the king resumes playing the huwego-de-prenda. The king is flustered by his conflictive exchange with the jasmine and blurts out:

23. **Umanda--excuse me--humanda kayo**
 'eady excuse me ready you all

at maguumpisa tayo uli.
 CONJ will begin we once again

"Eady--excuse me--are you ready to begin again?"

The king asks the sampaguita whether she has seen his lost butterfly. She answers that she saw it over at the cashew tree, but the cashew tree player is caught off-guard and does not respond.

24. **Kasoy tawag ng hari.**
 cashew call king

"Kasoy!" called the king.

25. **Wala rito sa kasyu tugon ng tinawag**
 there not here at cashew answer call

na isang tinedyer.
 a teenager

"It's not here at the cashew," a teenager suddenly responded.

26. **"Anong kasyu--kasoy!" pagtutuwid ng hari.**
 what cashew kasoy corrected king

"What do you mean kasyu? I said kasoy!" corrected the king.

27. **"Kasyu," ulit ng tinedyer.**
 cashew repeat teenager

"**Kasyu**," repeated the teenager.

All along, the player who is the cashew has been thinking of himself as **kasyu** (the Tagalog spelling for the English word cashew) rather than **kasoy**. So when **kasoy** is called by the sampaguita and the king, he fails to respond. [It is no accident that the women in this game are given the names of flowers while the men are named after fruit and nuts.] The king asks once more "Where's my lost butterfly?" and a player responds

28. **Dumapo sa pukinggan.**
 alight on flower

"It has alighted on the pukinggan flower."

With this utterance the whole audience guffaws because **pukinggan** contains the root **puki** which is the Tagalog word for vagina. This kind of mildly suggestive teasing is typical of a gathering of Filipino young people. [For several years my husband and I attended meetings of the Filipino student groups both at Michigan State and Ann Arbor and this kind of teasing was common. For example, there were kayak races at a picnic on the river at Ann Arbor and all the Cebuanos were giggling whenever anyone said "kayak" which resembles **kayat**.]

Discussion

This analysis demonstrates that intentional or unintentional phonemic substitution across languages is a source of humor in interactions between Filipinos from various ethnolinguistic groups. This is a definitional study which specifies the nature of phonemic substitution across languages. Further research needs to be done to determine how productive this process is in the genesis of humor. It is my hypothesis that this process will be typical of humor because of the intersection of languages in a multilingual setting like Manila. Additional data need to be collected to determine whether actual language use is consistent with this hypothesis.

Conclusions

It is not unusual for people living in a Manila to be bilingual, trilingual or even to have some familiarity with several languages. Even for monolinguals, playing with words is a productive source of humor. The possibility for wordplay becomes more sophisticated when interactants share several languages that they might draw upon to achieve humor. Phonemic substitution of similar words across languages is a source of humor. One important function that it serves is to indicate ethnolinguistic membership. This is also an indirect way of reinforcing intergroup rivalry. Cross-language substitutions permit interactants to make ordinarily prohibited sexual suggestions indirectly. Thus cross-language phonemic substitutions are consistent with face constraints mandated in interactions among Filipinos.

Notes

¹Kapampangan, according to McFarland, is a Sambalic language spoken throughout Pampanga province and in the southern half of Tarlac province. Both of these regions are situated north of Manila Bay and west of Bulacan province.

²It is possible to think of what I have here called "phonemic substitution" as a form of code switching.

³Echols and Shadily define a **pantun** as a traditional poem consisting of two couplets. The couplets are linked either allophonically or semantically.

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