

Introduction

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Language has the uncanny ability to not only reflect the world around us but to shape and transform it. It does not merely describe the realities that we inhabit or the identities that we perform, but it also creates, distorts, and, when absolutely necessary, reshapes them altogether. Through language, we can construct as much as deconstruct realities and identities. It seeps into every corner of our lives, public and private, and quietly wields power over what we consider truth and what we imagine to be possible. This interesting—but oftentimes overlooked—interplay between language, identity-making, and world-building is what this special issue, aptly titled *Seeping Through, Shaping Truth: Contesting the Politics of Language, Identity, and Representation*, seeks to explore.

The contributions in this special issue highlight how language is never a neutral tool but an active force in shaping our perceptions of truth and reality. We often think of language as a simple medium for communication, but if we look more closely, its role in constructing ideologies, reinforcing or challenging power dynamics, and shaping identities is far more potent, intricate, and consequential. In fact, language's power lies not in its ability to simply reflect the world but in how it actively creates the boundaries of what is acceptable, what is true, and what is possible. While I was attending a linguistic landscape panel in a conference in Pangasinan back in 2024, for example, a distinguished member of the audience argued rather strongly that “English is so pervasive in the linguistic landscapes of the Philippines that it has come to be *naturalized* and that the tone of research in the field seems to *demonize* the dominant place of English in society.” There is, admittedly, some truth to what the audience member said, but arguing that the dominance of English is something *natural* or that the dominance of English has become so naturalized so as not to question its place misses the fact that

English is not entirely “natural” to us, at least in the narrow sense of the word (Schueller, 2014; Serquiña, 2020). English, we have to remember, was a colonial *imposition* and reinforced in us through different social, economic, and cultural processes such as public education, globalization, and even historical forgetting (Tupas, 2003, 2008). As such, to dismiss that English is a naturalized phenomenon does quite a disservice, I believe, to decades of research that (1) interrogate our *historical* relationship with English; (2) critique our highly emotional, affective relationship with the language; and (3) surface the intersections between language, class, race, gender, and so much more (see Salonga, 2015; Reyes, 2017). In just this one example, we can see how language (and talking *about* language) can shape the truth, or at least our perception of what *counts* as the truth, and so much more. It can reinforce hegemonic and colonially induced views on language use as much as it can overlook and render the symbolically violent colonial experiences and histories of Filipinos invisible.

As scholars, we are therefore tasked with unraveling the complex ways in which language shapes not only the narratives we tell but also the structures of power within which these narratives circulate. In our very own context in the Philippines, this entails looking at how language occupies a central and defining role in how we talk about, sustain, and perhaps even contest gender and sexual identities, social hierarchies, alternative art forms, and class-based differences in light of our colonial experience and memories as a nation (Tupas, 2003, 2008), “the grip of English” (Lorente, 2013; Phillipson, 1992, 2013), and the overall stratification of Philippine society. The works featured in this issue engage with this complexity, offering insights into the intersections of language, identity, and representation, as the theme suggests, and how these elements are manipulated and contested within various societal, cultural, and political contexts. Montefalcon, in this issue, for example, unpacks how the hegemony of the English language in official public health communication materials that were created by the Department of Health – Western Visayas Center for Health Development imbues and sustains the inequality of multilingualism, demonstrating how institutional privileging of dominant languages such as English proves detrimental to the sociological growth of marginalized languages in

the Western Visayas region. By the same token, Roberto, Reig, and Valderama also surface and interrogate the use of languages in local public spaces, particularly in bus terminals in Cubao, Quezon City. They show how—despite the limited occurrences of incidental multilingualism, localization, and the fluid use of English and Filipino in the linguistic landscape of Cubao—there remains to be an overwhelming presence of monolingual English signages in the area, revealing how language hierarchies and uneven urban developments permeate and manifest in seemingly heterogenous spaces such as bus terminals. Keeping up with the overarching theme of inequality and hierarchization, Ballon, in his study of the English language curricula for business process outsourcing (BPO) companies in the Philippines, examines how communication trainers and managers reconcile pedagogical goals with the operational demands of the industry, which primarily revolve around conversational fluency and grammatical accuracy. Meanwhile, keeping up with the overarching theme of inequality and hierarchization, Cerrado, Maceda, and Pechangco explore how the concept of eliteness is discursively constructed through the “everyday discourses” on the “UP (University of the Philippines) *burgis*” phenomenon, ascertaining the semiotic markers that index such a construction of elite identity. Together, these studies underscore how the seemingly mundane deployment of language in everyday spaces actively form part of long-standing linguistic tensions and hierarchies that define the classed and social fabric of the Philippines.

Aside from its potent role in structuring and sustaining everyday inequalities in the Philippine context, however, language also functions as a tool for emancipatory and representative practices that enable the reimagining of identities, communities, and narratives. In this issue, for example, Rayos interrogates how language, specifically the practice of translanguaging, mediates the negotiation of identity within and beyond the liminality of migration in Philippine diasporic poetry, surfacing how such practices provide spaces for expressing native memory, hybridity, and cultural yearning. In a similar vein, Agustino and Alipan examine how the performative use of gender-related slurs in Drag Race Philippines figure in a much broader communal attempt at linguistic reclamation and identity-making. In their study, Agustino and Alipan demonstrate

how gender-related slurs, which were once used to discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals, can be used not only to subvert, resist, and reclaim narratives and truths, but also to reconstitute them by and for the members of the Philippine drag community. These works illustrate in broad strokes how community-based linguistic creativity and reappropriation opens up transformative spaces through which oppressed, underrepresented, and marginalized communities can assert their presence and reconfigure their agency as members of their respective communities.

At the heart of these contributions lies the central idea that language, ubiquitous and mundane as it may be, is anything but a simple communicative apparatus. It is a tool for action, resistance, and transformation. Whether in the localized, i.e., Philippine, contexts of gender, class, or identity, language has the capacity to challenge the *status quo*, reshape perceptions, and offer new possibilities for understanding our own experiences as Filipinos, a people whose colonial baggage and trauma still continue to shape how we deal and contest with language (see Tupas, 2015). Indeed, as the contributors to this issue show, the study of language is not just an academic endeavor. It is rather an exercise of rigorous inquiry and resistance, of posing uncomfortable questions and of disrupting dominant forces in the face of adversity—an exercise that the Chicana feminist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa describes as being “worth the pain” (2015, 22).

In closing, I invite you, the reader, to engage with these papers not just as scholarly contributions but as small-but-warranted acts of resistance or works that speak to the power of language to shape the world, and to the necessity of continuing to challenge, reimagine, and reassert the truths we hold dear as Filipinos. Through these contributions, we hope to offer a critical space where language, identity, and representation are not just analyzed but also—in some way or another—transformed, allowing for a deeper and locally situated understanding of how truth is shaped and reshaped in the Philippine context.

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