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Filipino Names: A reflection of culture and history

Names are powerful bearers of culture in a language. That is, names can provide an avenue to ascertain one's cultural or ethnic heritage. For instance, one can surmise that an individual named *Jose* is most likely from a Hispanic culture or one with Hispanic influence. However, it did not occur to me until our discussions in the course that names can also possess functionalities other than the aforementioned property. Specifically, in class we learned about how names used in discourse, either given (e.g. legal names) or not given (e.g. nicknames, kinship terms), also reflect relationships between the two speakers. For instance, Anna Wierzbicka provides a list of explications for variations of names in English (Wierzbicka, 1992). Also, Katarzyna Dziwirek describes the multi-level structure of Polish familial terms that vary based on social context and level of intimacy (Dziwirek). Looking at the naming conventions in my own language provided insights consistent with names as a reflection of national character and a mode for navigating the complex landscape of inter-personal relations.

Filipino names have heavy Spanish influences due to the country's colonial history. In the past, Filipinos were forced to choose a Spanish last name for convenience in the Spanish colonial registry. Thus, Filipino names do not necessarily reflect cultural or ethnic heritage. Indigenous naming practices (e.g. Filipino, Indo-Malayan), on the other hand, do—and are still present in areas that were not conquered by the Spanish in the past. In the Philippines, people typically follow the Iberian system of naming—given dual first name, last names. In this paper, I will focus on this system, used by the majority of Filipinos.

Filipino names provide an illustration of the nation's history. During the time of the Spanish, the dual first name was followed by the paternal last name, then the maternal last name. The letter *y* (or *e*) is used to separate the two last names. For instance, my name would have been *Jose Mario Pineda y Bello*. American colonization, however, brought with it the English naming convention: given first name, given middle name, paternal last name. The maternal last name was transformed into the middle name, as an adaptation. For instance, my name is Jose Mario Bello Pineda. The hybridization of the two systems coincidentally made our naming system identical to the Portuguese convention, and is currently in use.

In discourse, the use of this legal name is often reserved for formal situations or in interactions with a stranger or acquaintance. One can call another person by either of the first names or a combination of the two, by the person's last name, or the person's full name. The middle name alone cannot be used, and has no functionality in discourse. In all cases, intimacy cannot be expressed. Below is a list of explications for the aforementioned forms of the legal name in Filipino discourse, forms with honorifics are not described:

- A. USE OF LEGAL FIRST NAME (e.g. *Jose Mario*, *Jose*, *Mario*)
 - (a) I want to speak to you the way people speak
to people whom they don't know well
 - (b) You have done something bad (familial)

- B. USE OF LAST NAME (e.g. *Pineda*)
- (a) I want to assert my superiority (of rank) to you
 - (b) I want to speak to you the way people speak to people whom they don't know well
- C. USE OF FULL NAME SANS MIDDLE NAME (e.g. *Jose Mario Pineda*)
- (a) I want to speak to you the way people speak to people whom they don't know well
- D. USE OF FULL NAME (e.g. *Jose Mario Bello Pineda*)
- (a) I want to speak to you the way people speak to people whom they don't know well
 - (b) You have done something bad (familial)

Intimate relations are reflected instead in the use of nicknames. Nicknames in Filipino come in a spectrum of different forms, all cases reserved for discourse between close friends or family. Furthermore, because these nicknames can come in different forms, an individual can simultaneously harbor a multitude of names. Sometimes, a particular name is reserved for a particular social circle (e.g. family, school friends, community friends, work friends, in-laws, etc.). The nicknames can be truncated versions of the first names (e.g. *Mario* becomes *Mar*); the first syllable appended with an *-s* or a *-z* (e.g. *Mario* becomes *Mars* or *Marz*); the different combinations of the syllables of the full name (e.g. *Jose Mario Pineda* becomes *Jomari*, *Jomapi*, etc.); or nicknames unrelated to the given name (e.g. another nickname of mine is *Mao*, which has no direct linkage to my given name). These types of names are often chosen based on the phonetic appeal of the word to the provider of the name (others or self). Other times, the nicknames are chosen due to sentimental reasons. In all cases, there is no relative difference in the level of intimacy expressed between the forms. Kate McGeown further lists other similar examples of Filipino nicknames and how they were derived (McGeown, 2013).

Nicknames for children can be of the structural forms mentioned above. However, there exist some forms that are reserved only for children. These nicknames can be repetition of the single syllable form of the nickname (e.g. *Mao* becomes *Maomao*); or adjectives referring to a particular physical or personality trait (e.g. I was also called *Tisoy*, a Filipinization of the Spanish word *mestizo*, due to my fair complexion). One particular case, the use of food as a nickname, is interestingly reserved for girls. For instance, my sister *Vanessa* was called *Icing* when she was a child. It does not elude me that English nicknames can also take the form of food. However, these foods are usually sweet (e.g. *Honey*, *Honeybunch*, *Sugarpie*, etc.) to convey "sweet" emotions of intimacy. In contrast, the Filipino food nicknames seem to be arbitrary in this regard. For instance, my sister *Veronica* was called *Siopao* (savory meat bun) when she was younger. This may reflect a cultural difference: English speakers translate the flavor into an emotion, while Filipino speakers translate the value of the food itself, rather than the flavor, into an emotion.

In the child-specific nicknames, there is a deeper level of intimacy expressed in the female-specific nicknames compared to the more general forms. This is most likely due to the gender-bias in Filipino child-rearing, where people tend to discourage increased emotionality in boys and not girls. In cases where child-specific nicknames are applied to adults, the two

people involved in discourse are almost always in a romantic relationship. Otherwise, calling another individual by their child-specific nicknames is viewed as an insult to their maturity (intellectual or emotional). The aforementioned cases, using my name as illustration, or my sisters' names in the case of female-specific nicknames, have explications listed below:

- E. NICKNAME, UNRELATED TO FIRST NAME (e.g. *Mao*)
 - (a) I want to speak to you the way people speak,
to people whom they know well
 - (b) I feel something good towards you
- F. NICKNAME, SYLLABLE REPETITION (e.g. *Maomao*)
 - (a) I want to speak to you the way people speak
to children whom they know well
 - (b) I feel something good towards you
the kind people feel toward children
- G. NICKNAME, USE OF FOOD (e.g. *Siopao, Icing*)
 - (a) I want to speak to you the way people speak
to girls whom they know well
 - (b) I feel something good towards you
the kind people feel toward children
- H. NICKNAME, ABBREVIATION OR TRUNCATION (e.g. *Jomapi, Mar, Marz, JM*)
 - (a) I want to speak to you the way people speak
to people whom they know well
 - (b) I feel something good towards you
- I. NICKNAME, ADJECTIVE (e.g. *Tisoy*)
 - (a) I want to speak to you the way people speak
to people whom they know well
 - (b) I feel something good towards you
the kind people feel toward children

Looking at naming preferences over the years, we can derive temporal components of the evolution of Filipino names— specifically the first name, because this is the only substrate amenable to change in the current naming convention. Spanish names are associated with being traditional or old-fashioned. Currently, English names are dominant. Furthermore, the Spanish dual first name is slowly being displaced the Anglo single first name. In this case, preference reflects the most powerful and most recent influence on the country. That is, the most recent and significant source of cultural imposition on the Philippines is the United States through modes of direct colonialism and indirect neo-colonialism.

More recently, we see another shift in the naming system of the Philippines reminiscent of trends occurring in other multicultural societies such as Brazil (Romero, 2014). Specifically, there has been a surge in the use of “unique” names. Such divergence from more traditional English or Spanish names can present itself as alternative spellings of the name (e.g. *Irene* as

Airy, Charlene as *Charlyn*, Janine as *Johnine*), or as more radical diversions from the norm described by Marga Deona (Deona, 2013). She describes the recent incorporations of symbols, numbers, and other non-nominal words into Filipino first names as seen in the list of passers of the University of the Philippines College Admissions Test. For instance, she describes an individual with the name *Cyber 1A22 Gonzalez Cruz*, the Spanish middle and last names are preserved while the first name is changed. The changes also follow in the nicknames of the individuals. For instance, the student named *Sincerely Yours '98 Pascual* (middle name not specified) is nicknamed *Truly*, a play on the common letter closings *Sincerely yours* and *Yours Truly*. These changes reflect the emergent desire for individuality, possibly a cultural substrate derived from the United States.

We have seen that Filipino names, and its various forms, reflect the history of the nation as a product of different waves of foreign occupation. Specifically, a synthesis of the naming conventions used by Spain and the United States is seen in the naming system currently in practice. Furthermore, a temporal aspect to the evolution of the Filipino names is also seen in naming preferences over the years. We have seen that Filipinos use two naming categories to distinguish intimate vs non-intimate relations: legal names and nicknames. These names are able to create at least four levels of intimacy ranging from non-intimate (legal names), intimate (general nicknames), and more intimate (general child nicknames), and very intimate (female-specific child nicknames). Furthermore, these levels are discrete (i.e. less continuous than Polish which has a continuum of intimacy levels reflected linguistically). Thus, Filipino names provide a glimpse of the country's culture and a mode to navigate inter-personal relations, consistent with examples in other cultures.

Works Cited:

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