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"Ay, nosebleed!": Negotiating the place of English in contemporary Philippine linguistic life

Dana Osborne

Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, Ryerson University, Toronto, ON M5B 2K3, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This article describes and analyzes the form and function of the term 'nosebleed' as it is used by speakers in the contemporary Philippine linguistic scene. 'Nosebleed' operates as a metapragmatic, semiotic stance marking device used to bracket various kinds language/s in relation to concepts of high sociocultural value in the archipelago: local concepts of the commensurability of language- and person-types, and culturally-enregistered joking styles that mitigate *hiya*, or 'shame' in interaction. This analysis draws from popular discourses to outline the ideological foundations of the term and goes on to examine its social and linguistic effects to theorize the ways that homegrown metapragmatic tools such as 'nosebleed' can shape varieties of language over time.

1. Introduction

I did not go to the Philippines to study 'nosebleed' *per se* – but its ubiquity in daily interaction so clearly commented on circulating linguistic ideologies that to ignore it as a linguistic anthropologist would be a serious injustice to language studies in the archipelago. From 2012 to 2014, I was stationed in a provincial high school that will be called Pias National High,[1] focused primarily on the topic of language contact and change among speakers of the ethnolinguistic minority language of Ilocano in the northernmost part of Luzon. Speakers in Ilocos Sur and Norte typically speak at least three languages at various levels of competency: Ilocano as the L1, English and Tagalog/Filipino (L2/L3 variously), with some speakers also having competency in other ethnolinguistic minority languages from the surrounding regions, such as Kankanaey or Itneg.[2]

One of my first encounters with the term 'nosebleed' in interaction occurred with a third year student at Pias National, Joanna (a pseudonym). On this day, I had invited Joanna to sit with me in the school's canteen during *merienda* 'snack time' for a leisurely chat about school, friends, and favorite songs – I had developed this technique to get to know students better individually and in groups and students were always excited to share their thoughts and experiences with me. As I sat across the way from Joanna at the plastic table, surrounded by school supplies, snacks, and circulating teachers, I customarily switched back and forth between Ilocano and English – most students preferred interactions in Ilocanish (a mixing of Ilocano and English) and to this point, virtually all interactions with students had been very agreeable in this code. As I launched into some soft questions in Ilocanish, it became apparent that Joanna's initial excitement about the conversation was turning quickly into discomfort – her posture became smaller, her eyes widened, and a sidelong smile grew slowly across her face.

E-mail address: dana.osborne@ryerson.ca.

[1] All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

[2] These are indigenous languages of the Cordillera Region of the Philippines where Ilocano is spoken as a lingua franca.

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I paused for a moment and asked if she understood, using a highly enregistered Ilocano interactional frame – a serious question wrapped in a joking tease …

Example 1

Oy, Joanna, apay mabainka? Maawatam ti ibagbagak, wenno haan …

Hey, Joanna, why are you embarrassed? Do you understand me, or no …

Glancing sheepishly around the canteen with a half-smile, Joanna paused for a moment then dug deeply into the pocket of her newly sewn plaid school skirt, drawing out a well-worn hankie, and brought it slowly to one of her nostrils, politely uttering:

No Mam, sorry. **Nosebleed.**

In my naïve state, I could see that at the very least Joanna was uncomfortable, and quite possibly ill. After all, Pias National recently had a number of students fall ill with *chikungunya*[3] and I did not want to take any chances. I thanked her for coming to visit me and sent her off to care for her ailment with her friends – but as she reunited with her *barkada* 'group of friends' under the school's veranda, she immediately joined them in chorus as they sang along with Katy Perry's 2013 hit song "Roar" blasting from a tiny cellphone. In that moment, I came to understand that Joanna was in fact, perfectly healthy, and in actuality had no true nosebleed. Later inquiries with teachers indicated that Joanna had only recently returned with her family to Ilocos from Manila and was still in the process of learning Ilocano, with her strongest linguistic competency being in Tagalog.

As I continued throughout my work at Pias National, in the margins of fieldwork, I sought out more examples of the ways that students used 'nosebleed' in interaction. I found over time that it was used in far more creative and semiotically open-ended ways that were distinct from circulating concepts found in popular discourse, demarcating the boundaries of all sorts of linguistic encounters, language types, and speaking persons; in truth, Ilocano-speaking students at Pias National used the term in more open-ended, shifting ways than the imagined uses cited in dominant tropes and narratives, making it a rich source of local data. In popular discourse, the use of the term is typically applied almost exclusively to encounters with dense or difficult English-language speech or materials. Contrastingly, students at Pias National also used the term 'nosebleed' to mark regimes of understanding across a variety of linguistic encounters and speaking persons: to demarcate kinds of linguistic performances outside of "normative" uses such as gay speech, nerdy speech, varieties of Ilocano, and even to describe the effects of *listening to* non-standard or disfluent linguistic productions. The term 'nosebleed' was even extended to me more than once by students and teachers to describe their imaginings of my own mental taxation when learning and speaking *nauneg nga Ilocano* 'deep Ilocano' or other Philippine languages.

In this analysis, I argue that 'nosebleed"s semiotic transportability across linguistic landscapes in the Philippines has cast it as a powerful tool to bracket, through metapragmatic action as a stance-marking device, a way to define and delimit regimes of acceptability and legibility of languages within a culturally-enregistered framework of shame based on local theories of the commensurability of person- and language-types. In other words, 'nosebleed' is used as a metapragmatic tool to comment on interactional contexts in which language types are perceived to be commensurate or incommensurate with imaginings of preferred, legible, or normative linguistic selves. The invocation of 'nosebleed' as a metapragmatic device allows speakers to comment on language that is *so excessively out of bounds* that it exempts interlocutors from the communicative burden, rendering it highly efficacious as a language sanctioning tool within locally-legible interactional frameworks. In this way, the metapragmatic function of the term 'nosebleed' as a locally-enregistered semiotic stance-marking device carries with it the potential for cumulative effects in the maintenance of varieties of language realized by the subtle everyday negotiations made by speakers.

In the analyses that follow, I frame the discussion of the term 'nosebleed' using two sets of data: 1) the domain of explicit, popular definitions of the term, and 2) in its actual uses by speakers in everyday contexts. Most treatments of the term 'nosebleed' deal with outlining the frameworks found in popular definitions that are based on commonly held ideologies of language, where a specific ordering of Philippine languages are seen to sit lower on the idealized linguistic hierarchy than languages like English or even Spanish. In dominant discourse, 'nosebleed' in interaction is typically understood to be little more than an immature dodge used by "Filipinos too lazy to understand or engage with English," a point continuously found in folk analyses that will be discussed below. While an understanding of this definition is critical to revealing robust underlying ideologies of language, a truly meaningful understanding of the term 'nosebleed' lies in an analysis of its metapragmatic function in mundane everyday contexts, which is inextricably bound to culturally-enregistered modes of interaction. I argue that it is in the space of these subtle everyday negotiations, that are in many ways below explicit levels of awareness, that we can understand the ways in which speakers have insulated ethnolinguistic minority languages and local linguistic varieties from total domination and erasure in light of half a millennia of colonial and imperial occupation.

This analytical logic builds directly on the work of Vicente Rafael (1988, 2016), which understands the linguistic scene in the Philippines as being critically shaped by the politics and limits of translation in relation to the country's long-standing relationship with colonial and imperial occupation. Rafael describes the adaptive approach of translation on the

[3] A mosquito-borne disease with similar, but lesser symptoms to *dengue fever*, including rash and headaches.

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