

They and Siya: gender-fair language and the Filipinization of English – a report

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Abstract

The singular *they* in English has been the subject of debate in discussions of gender-fair language. However, Global Englishes have no problems in breaking away from linguistic norms maintained by native speakers of English, such as the case of the Philippines. As the national language, Filipino can be described to be gender neutral—supplemented by its pre-colonial treatment of non-heteronormative people—compared to English, a language uses masculine and feminine pronouns to refer to persons. Since colonial independence, English has evolved into a distinct variety whose defining characteristics have been influenced by Filipino. From this, a possibility of integrating a historically indigenous perspective on gender opens up an opportunity to accept gender-fair language in English. The genderlessness of Filipino places Filipino English speakers in a position to accept gender-fair English into everyday use, both positive directions to decolonization and gender mainstreaming in the country.

Keywords:

Introduction

In recent years, the use of the singular *they* in English has been the subject of multidisciplinary debate as one of the many components of global gender mainstreaming efforts. The generic *he* for referents with unknown or ambiguous genders implied a prevailing male bias when spoken, a problem that they would resolve as a neutral pronoun (Mooney & Evans, 2023). However, despite recognition from English language authorities, there is a present opposition of its use from a prescriptivist point of view. Grammatical inconsistencies, for example, break the established rules and precepts of proper English usage with *they's* status as a plural pronoun (Konnolly et al., 2024). This, nevertheless, can be observed as a problem of the native-speaking population with a history of preferring the generic male pronoun. From the point of view of a speaker of English as a second language (ESL), breaking these norms is as easy as varietizing the language itself; English in the Philippines would be no exception to this challenge.

In this regard of nativizing a formerly subjugating language, the increasing attention towards gender sensitivity in language can strengthen the ownership of English by Filipinos. Aside from sociocultural implications, a perspective that integrates the discussion of gender allows for deeper insight in achieving global ideals for gender equality through a culturally relevant approach. Perhaps, the singular *they* may find better acceptance from speakers who live with the gender-neutral *siya*, alongside other gender-fair reformulations that may already exist in their linguistic repertoire. Gender-fair English can build a bridge towards the further indigenization of the language as it parallels the already genderless Filipino to a greater extent.

Genderless Filipino

Austronesian languages mostly have no gender systems, with the exception of Tagalog solely because of significant Spanish influence in vocabulary (Corbett, 2013). Under the Austronesian language family is the Philippine languages, which themselves have no pronominal gender systems (Dela Cruz, 2023). Aside from the Tagalog *siya*, a third-person epicene singular pronoun, ungendered pronominals can also be found in Bikolano,

Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilokano, Kapampangan, and Pangasinense. The absence of significant gender systems in these languages can be adapted into Filipino, a relatively young language initially based off of Tagalog; the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino (Añonuevo, n.d.) would trace this to former Pres. Manuel Luis Quezon's Executive Order no. 134, s. 1937 as a result of a nationwide survey of Philippine languages for an indigenous basis of the national language. In its current definition since the 1987 Constitution, it is now recognized to be a dynamic language that actively adopts elements of non-Tagalog regional languages and assimilates foreign languages once dominant in the archipelago (Lacsamana, 2021). As the amalgamation of the Philippine languages, Filipino can be described to reflect its general gender neutrality.

Alongside the linguistic context, a diverse sociocultural concept of gender in the Philippines can be traced back to before the Spanish imposition of Catholic heteronormativity. Other than gender classifications of men and women, pre-colonial ethnolinguistic societies had in their vocabularies a wide array of gender-queer terms, most notable are the nominal terms for a male *babaylan* or religious priestess—*bayog*, *bayoguin*, *bayok*, *agi-ngin*, *asog*, *bido*, *binabae*, *balian*, *balean*, *babay*, and *balayan* (Kimuell-Gabriel, 2017). Whether they counted as transgender or just effeminate men, Spanish chroniclers described them as “non-conformist” to strict binary standards of the colonizers (Yarcia et al., 2019). Aside from that specific occupation, other queer indigenous terms include *mentefuwelay libun/lagey* (Teduray equivalents of transgender women and men, respectively) and *lakin-on* and *kuragkuragang* (Visayan for a masculine woman and their partner) (Ildefonso, 2022).

Gender-Fair English

Fast forward to the end of Spanish rule and the aftermath of the Philippine-American War in the early 1900s, American colonizers successfully instilled Western values in the archipelago through introducing English as the medium of instruction. A feature of this new prevalent language was the presence of natural gender. In English, there is a roughly equal partition of masculine and feminine role nouns with equivalent gender-neutral alternatives like ‘husband’, ‘wife’, and ‘spouse’, giving an impression of gender equality at least in the vocabulary (Mooney & Evans, 2023). The alternate pronouns, on the other hand, show a clear division of gender with *he/him/his* pronouns for male referents and *she/her/hers* pronouns for female referents, remnants of the previously grammatically gendered Anglo-Saxon or Old English (Ryan, 2017). Other pronouns are gender-neutral with *it* referring to a singular unsexed inanimate object and *they* for a plural and general pronoun for a group, regardless of gender.

In education, law, economy, and many other disciplines, English planted itself in the Filipino psyche, for better or for worse. As Constantino (2008) observed, in exchange for democracy, modernization, and globalization, the Filipino lost their “soul”. A foreign language became systematically preferred over the pre-colonial languages, something that the Spanish was unable to achieve. In addition to that supplantation, English speakers carried over a reinforcement of an already existing gender disparity as English maintained an image of social inequality and privilege. Filipinos hold a subconscious preference for non-indigenous cultural products and standards of language practice (Gonzales, 2017) while gender-based discrimination also acts as a barrier to this ideal in that the defiance of gender norms invites objectification, shame, guilt, and the justification of violence that lessens openness to gender-based solutions (Valdez et al., 2022). Until recent times, male biases or preferences for masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to ungendered or non-binary referents still exist in English-oriented curricula and textbooks, modernizing gender issues within the classroom between teacher and student (Aguilar-Delavin, 2022; Delavin & Buayan, 2020; Flores & Arandique, 2022). More work needs to be done to resolve enduring societal gender biases and colonial mentality.

Bridge to Indigenization

There is hope for a different direction regarding these issues. Now that Filipino speakers of English are left alone in the presence of native Philippine languages, a persistent indigenization of the English language began in

the country after post-World War II independence. American English drifted into Philippine English, a variety that can be differentiated through phonological, syntactic, and lexical errors that evolved into defining features or Filipinisms (Bautista, 2000). This Filipinized English, like other World Englishes, demonstrate linguistic developments in grammatical construction, accent and pronunciation, and integration of indigenous vocabulary reminiscent of post-colonial language drift (Esquivel, 2019). The consistent indigenization suggests the formation of nativized thought in a once foreign language, rooted in learning a language amidst local cultures and traditions. English became ingrained in Filipino society as yet another tongue to reflect the nuances of the Filipino identity (Lamanilao & Agdana, 2024). So implanted is English that emerging Philippine Englishes are identified, representing diversifications across social and ethnic strata like *conyo* English of well-off urbanites and *yaya* English of working-class maids that reflect separate Filipino realities (Borlongan, 2023). Furthermore, English is frequently paired with Filipino or other regional languages in informal speech, bringing about different -lishes like Taglish (Tagalog and English), Bislish (Bisaya and English), Ilocanglish (Ilokano and English), Ilonglish (Ilonggo and English), and many more (Lambert, 2017). Despite “losing the soul”, local manifestations of culture and tradition persisted and even shaped a foreign language into something distinctly Filipino.

From the possibility of Filipinizing English comes the feasibility of synthesis into an indigenized gender-fair reformulation and acceptance of English. As part of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, achieving gender equality at least in the official languages while enriching the cultural wealth of the country through decolonizing a global language is a massive advantage for the Philippines. There is already a fair amount of gender-fair language research that expresses support in ESL application with advocacies (Montano et al., 2024), study guides (Cabuotan & Lincod, 2025), and pre-service teacher education in general (Cantalejo et al., 2024). The Filipino language side also expresses interest in reforming gender-biased literature and learning materials to better enhance gender education (Dela Peña, 2023) and in indigenizing Western theories on gender and education such as queer theory, childhood studies, critical studies, and critical pedagogy to analyze those materials (Sarce, 2022). Nevertheless, a lack of recognition hovers around the role of the country’s gender-diverse pre-colonial experience which are then not noticed in gender-fair language studies. Maybe, introducing gender as a possible factor in embracing a truly Filipino English can bring into discussion the forgotten past into gender mainstreaming efforts of a language used in various aspects of modern life. This opens opportunities for a real Filipino convergence that keeps up with the rapid pace of gender-sensitive demands brought by modernity.

To a greater extent

The Philippines has ample opportunity to adopt a gender-fair formulation of the English language. Linguistically, Philippine languages do not have gendered pronouns as exemplified in the Filipino *siya* that cannot be translated into the he/she pronoun dichotomy of English. Historically, pre-colonial societies had a very diverse understanding of gender that only disappeared once Western ideas of gender became the prevailing perspective, whether from a Spanish Catholic framework or an American secular viewpoint. The genderless attributes of Filipino that it inherited from its gender-neutral Philippine linguistic ancestors, coupled with a pre-colonial history of recognizing gender diversity, places Filipino English speakers in a position to seamlessly integrate gender-fair English into everyday use that reflects both modern values and indigenous traditions.

However, alongside the direction that Filipinos can take regarding gender and language, certain challenges appear to inhibit this development. Traditional values of heteronormative ideals hold a tight grip in gender-related discourse, influencing any attempts to deviate from what is socially acceptable for the past hundred years. Inferiority towards former colonial masters also reflect in the overt preference of foreign standards and morals instead of looking first into what indigenous knowledge may offer. When these two are resolved, the Philippines can take a significant step towards cultural decolonization and, at the same time, gender equality—through a conquest of the English language and a strong Filipino determination to shape it according to native gender

realities. This shift would ultimately contribute to a more equitable Philippine society with a deep-rooted identity that walks along the forceful currents of rapid globalization.

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