Chinese Filipinos tag their questions, *kiam si*?

Some notes on tag questions in Philippine Hybrid Hokkien

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Abstract

This paper investigates tag questions in a Philippine contact variety spoken by Chinese in the Philippines called Philippine Hybrid Hokkien (PHH) – a trilingual admixture that is characterized by the systematic co-existence of the Hokkien, Tagalog, and English grammatical (sub)systems. After analyzing spontaneous oral data gathered from native speakers, ten types of tag questions were identified, with two of them being bilingually innovative and unique to PHH (e.g. *m si ba*?). Further analyses of data reveal that attitudinal tag questions are more frequently used than confirmatory tag questions. That alternative tags (e.g. *okay*?) are more preferred compared to their canonical counterparts have also been suggested by initial data. Although the use of tag questions in PHH is reminiscent of the individual grammars of English, Tagalog, and Hokkien, data suggests that PHH, whether analyzed as a trilingual linguistic variety or a hybrid *X*-English, is developing away from these normative languages and that the Chinese Filipinos are creating new norms for this variety.

Keywords: Chinese Filipinos; Philippine English; Philippine Hybrid Hokkien; mixed languages; tag questions

Preliminaries

In the Chinese enclaves of the Philippines, particularly in the Binondo and Quezon City, a peculiar oral linguistic phenomenon can be observed to be spoken by the Chinese Filipinos (i.e. Filipino-Chinese, *Chinoys*, etc.) residing there. What appears to be an entirely different

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language is apparently and primarily a systematic concoction of three typologically distinct and symbiotic languages used in the Manila language ecology – Hokkien, Tagalog, and English (Gonzales, in press). This variety is called Philippine Hybrid Hokkien (PHH), popularly known as *Salamtsam(-oe)* 'mixed speech' or *halo-halo* 'mix-mix'. I have previously referred to this as 'Hokaglish' in my previous work (Gonzales, 2016).

Just like its component languages, PHH has its own grammar – one that is reflective of the grammars of the three said languages. Each of these three languages contribute certain linguistic structures in certain domains. For instance, the Hokkien genitive affix *–e* and the Tagalog instrumentalizer *pang-* have been grafted onto the PHH nominal domain and are typically found in SVO PHH clauses; the Tagalog verbal affix *nag-* and other Tagalog affixes in the verbal domain, however, may only be found in VSO ones. English mainly contributes to PHH through the transplantation of selected conjunctions like *so,* as well as reinforcing the SVO word order that is argued to be the direct influence of Hokkien. The combination of these grammatical subsystems is what makes PHH a unique variety.

Looking at this using Thomason's (1997) typology, PHH seems to exhibit attributes of a mixed language, since mixed languages in general are characterized by a grammar that has a split (i.e. verbal-nominal; lexical-grammatical), as well as other social factors. This is in contrast to an earlier argument I made, where I framed PHH as a trilingual code-switching phenomenon without a grammar (Gonzales, 2016). Apparently, PHH has one and it has been conventionalized despite the conflicting processes of language maintenance and shift among the Chinese Filipinos.

On the other hand, using Schneider's (2016) framework, PHH is considered an *X-English* or a hybrid English (Gonzales, 2017). Gonzales (2017) frames PHH or 'Hokaglish' as a variety of English in the Philippines. But regardless of the label, one thing is clear – that PHH is a variety that has a set of rules, and these rules are what I would like to investigate in this paper. It has several linguistic features that are manifested from the phonological to the syntactic level. Of these features, I aim to give an initial description of one; particularly, I attempt to describe how Chinese Filipinos use tag questions in PHH conversations from a data bank that I have compiled from my field work from 2015 to 2017. The data bank comprises of spontaneous oral data from 21 to 70-year-old Chinese Filipinos.

Tag questions in focus

For decades, tag questions have provided linguists opportunities for research in, but not limited to, pragmatics. For example, Borlongan (2008) delved into tag questions in Philippine English adopting a corpus-based approach on ICE-PH data. He attempted to associate tag questions and their polarity types with their pragmatic functions and identified similarities of tag question use in Philippine English with other Englishes. Whether or not the same similarities occur in PHH conversations is a matter of interest, but it is imperative that the definition of tag questions first be established.

Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik (1985, p. 810) define tag questions as statement appendices that either convey a positive or negative orientation to express "maximum conduciveness":

(1) The boat hasn't left, **has it?**

(2) Joan recognized you, **didn't she?**

In their examples above, *has it* and *didn't she* are attached to their respective declarative statements. On the other hand, Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan (1999, p. 208) identify the same phenomenon as "question tags", which consist of an operator and a personal pronoun and is typically attached to the preceding declarative clause. Moreover, like Quirk et al. (1985), they note that the personal pronoun in the question tag must be co-referent with the subject. In other words, the personal pronoun must refer to the subject in the declarative clause before it. Biber et al. (1999) further notes that the tag question appended are generally opposite to the statement with regard to polarity:

(3) She's so generous, **isn't she?**

(4) She's not a lesbian, **is she?**

In (3), the statement before the tag question shows positive orientation resulting to a negative tag question while in (4), the opposite happens. However, both Biber et al. (1999) and Quirk et al. (1985) agree on the possible use of positive tag questions with positive declarative statements:

(5) She likes her granddad, **does she?**

Quirk et al. (1985) summarize these into five general rules for the formation of tag questions, which are summarized as follows:

(a) The tag question generally consists of an operator and a subject.

(b) The operator is generally the same as the operator of the preceding statement. If the statement has no operator, the dummy auxiliary DO is used, as for yes-no questions in general.

(c) The subject of the tag should be a pronoun which either repeats, or is in co-reference with, the subject of the statement, agreeing with it in number, person, and gender.

(d) If the statement is positive, the tag is generally negative, and vice versa.

(e) The nuclear tone of the tag occurs on the auxiliary, and is either rising or falling.

While Quirk et al. (1985) provide a general guideline for the formulation of tag questions, Biber et al. (1999) point out some instances where tag questions do not necessarily follow the rules. For instance, the pronoun in the tag question may not refer to the subject in the declarative statement as in (6), because the speaker might have shifted the assignment of conversational roles, thus including the speaker and the addressee. Also, like in (7), it is possible that tag questions be added in interrogative clauses as opposed to the canonical rule pertaining to the attachment of tag questions to declarative statements. Imperative statements may also be added such as (8). Finally, a range of alternative tag questions that express the

same idea as the canonical tag question may also be used; these include, *innit?*, *right?* (9), *yeah?, okay?, eh?* (with the upward tone), and *don't you think?*

(6) You only had these two bags, **didn't we?**

(7) Do you want this **do you**, anywhere?

(8) Give them a message from me, **will you?**

(9) No one could speak French on that French trip. It's so stupid, **right?**

Right in (9) can be considered a tag question since it can be replaced with the canonical tag *isn't it*. Up to this point, the discussion on tag questions have been in the perspective of the English language. The purpose of tag questions in Tagalog and Hokkien are similar to the one in English, which is that it appeals for confirmation.

Although there is no specific reference to this phenomenon in Schachter & Otanes' (1972) reference grammar of Tagalog, tag questions in Tagalog take the form *hindi ba?* and *ano?,* with the truncated forms also used frequently (e.g. *'di ba?* and *'no?*). Schachter & Otanes (1972, p.500) refers to these as "confirmation questions". Take note of the regular and clipped versions between the two examples below:

(10) *Pu ~punta ka,* ***hindi ba?***

DUP~ go.IRR.IMP 2SG NEG PRT

'You're going, aren't you?'

(11) *Ka ~kain ka,* ***'di ba?***

DUP ~eat.IRR.IMP 2SG NEG PRT

'You're eating, aren't you?'

In Hokkien, similar to Quirk et al. (1985), Lin (2015) also uses the term *tag questions* to refer to the phenomenon. Investigating the Hokkien in Taiwan, he identifies three types of tag questions to seek confirmation of the proposition or the statement preceding the tag question: the general purpose tag *si tioh bo* (12) or the clipped *si bo*, affirmative tags *hoh* and *nih*, and the pure negative tag *m*.

(12) Lán pài-gō· ū khó-chhì**, sī tio̍h-- bô?**

1PL Friday have test book COP correct NEG

'We have a test on Friday, don't we?'

English tag questions in PHH

okay?

In PHH, the canonical *operator* + *pronoun* tag question structure is non-existent in the data when looking at the use of English tag questions; however, the simple lexical tag *okay*, referred to by Biber et al. (1999) earlier as an alternative tag, is one of the two basic English tag questions used (13). It should be noted at this point that, for ease of reference, Tagalog words in all the following examples are italicized while English words are underlined. Hokkien words are in plain text.

(13) A: *Tapos tioh* share with one another, **okay**?

CONJ MOD share with one another okay

'After that, you should share with one another, okay?'

B: [change of topic]

In (13), the English tag question *okay* is appended to the proposition or the clause *tapos tioh share with one other* headed by the conjunction *tapos* with the covert subject *you* and predicated by the modal auxiliary *tioh* with the main verb *share* followed by a prepositional phrase. In the clause, one can observe that the speaker first commands the listener to share something with other people, in parallel with Biber et al.'s (1999) description of the use of imperative statements as possible propositions for the tag question discussed earlier. (13) also shows the speaker ending with the tag question *okay* to ask for confirmation. The response of the listener is completely unrelated to the speaker's request.

A variation of the use of *okay* as a tag question is apparent in PHH conversations:

(14) A: Din tsiah tseh, **okay bo**?

2PL eat TEN okay PRT

'You eat first, okay?'

B: [change of topic]

In (14), the Hokkien negative question particle *bo* is attached to the existing tag question *okay,* resulting to a more complex tag question, although there will be no apparent changes in meaning if the Hokkien particle *bo* were to be removed.

(15) A: Din tsiah tseh, **okay *ba***?

2PL eat TEN okay PRT

'You eat first, okay?'

B: [change of topic]

If we replace the Hokkien particle *bo* with the Tagalog particle *ba*, the meaning will also not be affected as long as it is in the sentence-final position along with another tag question like in (15), otherwise, it may sound awkward and ungrammatical:

(16) A: Din tsiah tseh ***ba***?

2PL eat TEN PRT

'You eat first?'

Typically, the Tagalog enclitic particle *ba* is used for *yes-no* questions and *wh*-questions as reported in an investigation of bilingual code-switching by Lim and Borlongan (2011) involving English and Tagalog. Although it sounds problematic, the Tagalog enclitic *ba* in hypothetical (16) is more of a *yes-no* question marker rather than a tag question, which is usually confirmatory in nature, meaning it answers the question with *yes* or *no* rather than *okay* or *alright* to show confirmation.

Such is the case, too, for the Hokkien sentence-final question particle *bo* if used without the English tag question *okay*. The result may sound quite unnatural without the modal auxilliary *beh* 'want' in between the second person pronoun *din* and the main verb *tsiah*, although the *bo* may not be considered a tag question anymore if the modal were added.

(17) A: Din tsiah tseh ***bo***?

2PL eat TEN PRT

'You eat first?'

no?

Aside from *okay*, the other tag question that appeared in the PHH conversation data is the English *no*:

(18) A: MacArthur Bridge *ba* hi ge? *O* Jones Bridge? Jones Bridge, **no**?

MacArthur Bridge PRT DEM CLF CONJ Jones Bridge Jones Bridge no

'Is that MacArthur Bridge or Jones Bridge? It's Jones Bridge, no?'

A: [continuation]

In (18), the speaker ends with the English tag *no* and continues on speaking. In this example, *no* appears to exhibit an attitudinal function; in other words, the speaker does not necessarily expect a response from the listener.

Quirk et al. (1985) have not documented any instances of non-canonical tag questions such as *no* in (18). Biber et al. (1999), however, noted the use of *yeah*, which is the clipped version of *yes* as an alternative tag question. Like other tag questions, the polarity of the tag question *yes* may be inversed, suggesting that the use of *no* as a tag question is acceptable. However, unlike other canonical propositions, *Jones Bridge* seems to imply the complete clausal meaning *It's Jones Bridge* when the whole context is taken into account.

It is worth noting that the English tag question *no* should not be confused with the Tagalog particle or tag question *'noh?*.

Tagalog tag questions in PHH

'di ba?

Aside from English, also present in PHH conversations are Tagalog tag questions. Of the three basic Tagalog tag question structures, the truncated *'di ba* (19) from the base form *hindi ba* has the most attestations:

(19) A: Gun u thak … *ano*… hambun. Mandarin *yun*, '***di ba****?*

1PL have study what Chinese Mandarin that NEG PRT

'We have studied… uh… Chinese. That's Mandarin, isn't it?

A: [continuation]

Schachter and Otanes (1972, p. 500) identify *'di ba* in (19) not as a tag question but as a "confirmation question". Nevertheless, in this paper, they would be referred to as tag questions, similar to the preceding section. The Tagalog tag question in (19) is appended to the clause *Mandarin yun* 'That's Mandarin.' to express expectancy of a reply made by the questioner.

From this example, one can see that *'di ba* was attached to predominantly Tagalog sentence or to what Myers-Scotton (1993) would point out as a clause with Tagalog as the matrix language and English as the embedded language. As of this point, it would make sense that the Tagalog tag question *'di ba?* should follow the Tagalog-matrix-language clauses, but what about cases where the matrix language is not Tagalog, but Hokkien?

(20) A: *Pero* di u khi hi siammi an hotel tsoekang *muna*, '***di ba***?

CONJ 2SG have go DET what at hotel work first NEG PRT

'But you have initially worked at the … uh… hotel, right?'

B: Ho! Tsiusi pigiap college diau *deretso* khi…

Yes! Just graduate college after straight go

'Yes! After college, I directly went…'

Unlike (19), (20) shows an example where the proposition's matrix language is predominantly Hokkien. In this case, the use of the Tagalog tag question *'di ba?* is still considered grammatically accurate even with the removal of all embedded Tagalog words from the proposition:

(21) A: Di u khi hi siammi an hotel tsoekang, '***di ba***?

2SG have go DET what at hotel work NEG PRT

'You have worked at the … uh… hotel, right?'

Apparently, no grammatical rule violations can be observed even after the removal of the Tagalog words in (21), proving that the Tagalog question *'di ba?* can be used in a clause where Hokkien is mainly used. In some cases where the matrix language may be a challenge to pinpoint, *'di ba?* can also be used:

(22) A: *Kasi* Chiang Kai Shek *kaya* tai-oan, '***di ba***?

CONJ Chiang-Kai-Shek CONJ Taiwan NEG PRT

'Because it's Chiang-Kai-Shek; thus, it has to be Taiwan, right?'

A: [continuation]

On first glance, the proposition may appear to have Tagalog as the matrix language, but after deeper analysis of the clause and taking into account Sinitic syntax involving the *conjunction + phrase + conjunction + phrase* structure, some may argue that the proposition can be predominantly Hokkien. Nevertheless, it would appear that, in this case, *'di ba?* is seamlessly integrated into the utterance.

4.2 tama ba?

Another matter of interest would be the Tagalog tag question, *tama ba?*. Whether or not it should be considered a tag question could be a subject of debate as it is not included in Schachter and Otanes' (1972) reference grammar and probably would not be in other reference grammars since does not follow the conventions of a canonical tag question. However, the tag question, is translated as *correct* or *right* in English and appears to be confirmatory in nature:

(23) A: Iengbun is octopus, ***tama ba***?

English is *octopus* right PRT

'The English term is *octopus*, right?'

A: [continuation]

In (23), the questioner is asking the listener whether or not the English term is correct or not, then he or she proceeds with *tama ba?* 'right?' and continues on speaking. If replaced by the canonical counterpart of *right?*, which is *isn't it?*, the meaning of the sentence would be quite similar and both tag questions would be grammatically accurate when attached to the proposition. Also, Biber et al. (1999) consider *right?* and other similar ones as alternative tag questions, which are basically used colloquially to express the same sense as canonical tag questions. Hypothetical examples derived from (23) are as follows:

(24) Iengbun is octopus, **correct**?

English is *octopus* correct

'The English term is *octopus*, correct?'

(25) Iengbun is octopus, **isn't it**?

English is *octopus* is NEG 3SG

'The English term is *octopus*, isn't it?'

4.3 noh?

Further investigation on Tagalog tag questions revealed an instance of *noh* appended to a declarative statement:

(26) *Mahal* Turkey, Greece, ***noh***? *Pero* na di ai khi…

Expensive Turkey, Greece, PRT CONJ CONJ 2SG love go

'Turkey and Greece is expensive, right? But if you want to go…'

Noh is a contracted or clipped version of the Tagalog tag *ano* (what), which is what Bautista (2011) identifies as a pragmatic particle prevalent in Tagalog and Philippine English texts. Moreover, Bautista (2011) notes that, similar to the earlier discussed *'di ba* and *tama ba, noh* is an invariant tag question primarily due to its indifference to the polarity, form, and tense of the proposition.

5. Hokkien tag questions in PHH

Tagalog and English tag questions in PHH conversations have been investigated up to this point. What has not been discussed are Hokkien tag questions.

5.1 tioh bo?

One of the tag questions observed in PHH conversations is *tioh bo?,* which roughly translates to *right?* in English. *Tioh* means correct in Hokkien while *bo* is a polysemous negative particle and can be used as a negative for possession, existence, emphasis, among many others (Lin, 2015). It being appended as a general-purpose tag is one of its many roles, such as in (27). When used together with *tioh*, the tag question calls for the listener to confirm what the speaker asked, similar to its English counterpart.

(27) Dan binna *sigurado* nine o'clock beh pe, **tioh bo**?

1PL tomorrow sure nine o'clock MOD fly right NEG

'We will fly tomorrow at nine o' clock, right?'

The earlier tag question may also not appear last in the sentence. In (28), *pa* 'dad' can be found in the sentence-final position, after *tioh bo*. Also, observe that the tone of *bo* differs when something is appended after it.

(28) A: Kam sia tsu la, **tioh bo**, pa?

feel thanks Lord PRT right PRT Dad

'Thank God, right, Dad?'

B: *Hindi hindi hindi!*

NEG NEG NEG

'No, no, no!'

An additional particle, *a*, may also be appended to the tag question and will not result to noticeable meaning changes. Observe (29):

(29) Dan binna *sigurado* nine o'clock beh pe, **tioh bo a**?

1PL tomorrow sure nine o'clock MOD fly right NEG PRT

'We will fly tomorrow at nine o' clock, right?'

5.2 m si ba?

Aside from *tioh bo?* and *tioh bo a?,* PHH conversations revealed yet another Hokkien tag question. Observe (30):

(30) A: Hi ge tsui si kaiki in -e, **m si *ba***?

DET CLF water COP self 3PL-GEN NEG COP PRT

'That water is theirs, isn't it?'

B: Ho.

Yes

'Yes.'

In (30), *m si ba?* 'isn't it' is attached to the proposition, also requesting confirmation from the listener. The listener then responds with *ho* 'yes'. Also, worth noting is that since the Tagalog enclitic particle *ba* is present, it could said that this tag question takes its influence from the Tagalog tag *hindi ba?* or *di ba?* and is, therefore, unique to PHH.

5.3 kiam si?

Another tag question that can be observed in PHH is *kiam si?*, which translates to the modal auxiliary *would* and copula *is* literally in English. Usually, it can assume medial position in a clause like in example 33.

(31) Lan **kiam si** tsiage u kio i check hi ge *sakto-ng* hoai ah ...

1PL MOD COP January have call 3SG check DEM CLF exact-LIG DEM PRT

'Didn't we call him/her to exactly check those on January?'

However, in some cases, it functions as a tag question and has the same meaning as *m si ba?*.

(32) U sin khui e tsuhe so, **kiam si**? Blumentritt hia u.

Have new open PRT meeting place, MOD COP Blumentritt DEM have

'There's a newly opened Christian Gospel Center, isn't it? There's one in Blumentritt.'

The negative *m* may also be added in between *kiam* and *si* to indicate the opposite, like in hypothetical (33) and also mean the same thing like in (32) earlier.

(33) U sin khui e tsuhe so, **kiam m si**? Blumentritt hia u.

Have new open PRT meeting place, MOD NEG COP Blumentritt DEM have

'There's a newly opened Christian Gospel Center, isn't it? There's one in Blumentritt.'

5.4 ho bo and ho bo a?

Some tag questions present in PHH that are not attested in the conversation data would be *ho bo?, ho bo a?,* and all of which means *okay* in English.

(34) *Tapos tioh* share with one another, **ho bo**?

CONJ MOD share with one another good NEG

'After that, you should share with one another, okay?'

(35) *Tapos tioh* share with one another, **ho bo a**?

CONJ MOD share with one another good NEG PRT

'After that, you should share with one another, okay?'

Despite the change of tag questions, all the hypothetical derived instances above are acceptable and grammatically correct, even if the tag question is bilingual.

6. Conclusion

Using data from recorded oral conversations, this investigation focused on tag questions in PHH and provided an initial description of their use. Analysis revealed several types of tag questions, with two of them unique to PHH – *okay bo?* and *m si ba?* Further explorations also showed that, comparable to Borlongan's (2008) study on Philippine English, tag questions are generally used in PHH for its attitudinal function, that is, it is used even without the speaker expecting a reply. Two instances in the data, however, exhibit confirmatory function.

The study also provided an interesting contrast to Borlongan's (2008) findings. Although he noted that the English tag *isn't it?* is positioning itself to be a general tag question due to its high frequency, PHH conversations interestingly revealed no such instances; however, it could largely be due to the fact that PHH is dominantly Hokkien. Instead, preliminary PHH data shows that the alternative tag *okay?* is the most frequent English tag question used in conversations, although a larger source of data may be needed to fully establish this. Nevertheless, it provides a refreshing insight on the use of monolingual tag questions, particularly English ones, in PHH. It also suggests that alternative tags such as *okay?* are more preferred compared to their canonical counterparts. On polarity types, PHH exhibits instances of the canonical positive-negative and non-canonical positive-positive polarities; however, other polarity types appear to be non-existent in the data.

In the past few decades, prescriptivists have promoted the use of canonical tag questions. While it is still considered an essential benchmark, other alternative forms of tag questions have gradually emerged as vestiges of colonialism and language contact, in general. Such deviant structures in PHH say much about it as a contact variety. Up to this point, PHH has exhibited tag questions involving two languages and these tag questions are seamlessly and systematically attached to multilingual clauses. Two things are suggested here. First, as a language in general, evidence of the distinguishable Tagalog, English, and Hokkien tag

question subsystems co-existing in PHH, whether appended after Hokkien or English-based SVO clauses or Tagalog VSO clauses, distinguishes PHH as a trilingual contact variety such as Light Warlpiri spoken in Australia (O'Shannessy, 2005). Evidence of innovation or combination of these subsystems that is manifested in bilingual tags also suggests that PHH is developing as a linguistic variety. Secondly, as a hybrid English, the unique use of PHH monolingual and bilingual tags proves that Philippine English is generally progressing towards differentiation in Schneider's (2003) dynamic model. In contrast to Schneider (2003) and Martin's (2014) suggestion of Philippine English still nativizing, Borlongan (2016) suggests that it is already endonormatively stable, with Gonzales (2017) further remarking that it has already reached the final stage (i.e. differentiation) in the said model.

Regardless of what framework one uses to analyze PHH, we see that PHH is exhibiting signs of development away from normative languages like Hokkien, Tagalog, or English in the Chinese Filipino language ecology (Gonzales, in press). The description provided is, indeed, far from comprehensive. But what remains essential is the number of questions this paper can potentially answer, especially in studies of English language, language contact, and language variation.

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Appendix A: Glossing Abbreviations

1SG – first person singular

2SG – second person singular

3SG third person singular

1PL – first person plural

2PL – second person plural

3PL – third person plural

ADV – adverb

AFX – affix

CLF – classifier

CONJ – conjunction

COP – copula

DEM – demonstrative

DET – determiner

DIST – distal marker

EXIST – existential

FUT – future tense

GEN – genitive marker

INT – intensifier

LK - linker

LIG – ligature

LOC – locative marker

MOD – modal auxiliary

NEG – negative marker

PER – perfective marker

PLU – plural marker

PREP – preposition

PROG – progressive marker

PRT – particle

About the Author

Wilkinson Daniel Wong GONZALES is a graduate student at the National University of Singapore pursuing a degree in English language and linguistics. He works on world Englishes, corpus linguistics, contact linguistics, (socio)historical linguistics, as well as language documentation. Specifically, he is interested in Philippine languages used by the Chinese Filipino community, such Philippine Hybrid Hokkien (PHH), Philippine Hokkien, Philippine Chinese English, and Philippine Mandarin, working on topics related to these languages and their speakers. Some of his research on these topics have been presented in various conferences world-wide, while others have been published in refereed local and international journals such as the *Philippine Journal of Linguistics, Asian Englishes*, and *Language Ecology*.