

## **Language use in shifting contexts: Two multilingual Filipinos' narratives of language and mobility**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores languages repertoire of two Filipinos who were brought up in a multilingual family and subsequently left their home country to live abroad. Both participants were exposed to more than 4 languages at their home country before they went to live abroad. The study was guided by three research questions: 1) how do these multilinguals use their languages? 2) what kind of linguistic dynamics the participants encountered during their mobility experiences? 3) how do the participants perceive themselves in relation to their linguistic and cultural identity? Narrative-based study was adopted to conduct this research. Data were elicited using open-ended interviews. The major findings show that although participants are still attached with their local languages, shifting of dominant language occurs in line with their mobility experiences. In addition, there is also an indication of language shift that takes place on the fourth generation. The 1<sup>st</sup> generation languages (participants' grandparents, i.e. Ibanag and Karay-A) are no longer spoken and Tagalog is not inherited to the 4<sup>th</sup> generation of one of the participants.

**Keywords:** language shift, multilingual speakers, dominant language, language dynamics

### **Introduction**

In today's globalized era, mobility is of a common reality. Along with this mobility, languages and cultures also flow across border. It is most likely that people will learn and acquire new language(s). As Canagarajah (2005) explains that the world today are heading towards multilingual and multicultural way of life. However, complications of mobility also exist. Speakers are faced with the dynamicity of the linguistics landscapes of the places they migrate to. At times, one would be faced with the thought of shifting to the dominant language in their specific linguistic condition. This

study explores the complications that have been brought about by migration and how the speakers feel about their new linguistic environment.

Language shift is defined by Weinreich (1968, p. 68) as “the change from the habitual use of one language to that of another.” People have a habitual use of one language and this language can be said as the dominant language used by the speaker in a certain domain. When someone decides to move from his previous habitual use of one language to another dominant language, this person, as Weinreich (1968) explains, is shifting his dominant language.

Fishman (1991) points out three key aspects that need to be considered in evaluating language maintenance and language shift: habitual language use, behavioral towards language, and socio-cultural change processes (in Li Wei and Milroy, 2003). Fishman also introduce “domain analyses” in studying language maintenance and language shift that analyze the habitual language use of individual multilingual.

Li Wei (2007) points out that many scholars perceive language use and language choice by multilinguals or bilinguals as an ‘orderly social behavior.’ This means that multilinguals make decision which language they choose to use in a certain speech community. Choose which language to be used is not ‘a random matter of momentary inclination but rather a managed behavior where the speakers aware of their choices (Li Wei, 2007). People choose which language they will use and the choices of language depend on certain social factors that are important in accounting for language choice (Holmes, 2008) and Fishman (2007) domain theory is the most concept used as the factors in analyzing language choice. Fishman (2007, p. 68) argues that “the concept of domains of language choice represents and attempt to provide socio-cultural organization and socio-cultural context for considerations variance in language choice in multilingual settings.” Fishman (1972) identifies there 5 (five) main domains that relate to language choice which are family, friendship, religion, education and employment and these domains often determine the variety of language as well as the style of language used (Li Wei, 2007). Hence, multilinguals make their own decision of their languages use in certain domains. Language use in one domain may be different to language use in another domain. This study looks at multilinguals in different contexts and their specific domains and their view on languages and mobility. The study was guided with the following research questions: 1) what are the linguistics experiences of the two participants?, 2) what factors affecting their language use in different contexts and domains? 3) what are the participants view about their languages and mobility?

Research Methodology

The study is a small-scale descriptive qualitative case study, harboring itself under the narrative inquiry framework. Narrative inquiry is employed due to, as Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) explain, its philosophical assumptions of pluralism, relativism and subjectivity. In this study, the participants reflected on their past and present inter-linguistic experiences and constructed their understanding of these realities through narratives. To gather these narrative data, the study employed narrative interviewing as method. The in-depth semi-structured interview questions were designed to gather the participants’ language life history. The Interviews were taken place in an informal setting in order to attain natural outcomes so that language life history can be elicited from the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews were about 45 – 60 minutes. The data were then analysed and coded based on reoccurring themes. Statements, phrases from the transcriptions were labeled and grouped according to the codes for analysis.

The participants of this study are 2 Filipinos who grew up in the Philippines but currently living in Jakarta for more than 5 years. Their personal details are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1  
Data of Participants

	Angel (Pseudonym)	Ray (Pseudonym)
Origin:	Philippine	Philippine
Current citizenship:	USA	Philippine
Age:	45 years	31 years
Status:	Married with 2 sons	Single
Spouse	US Citizen	n/a
Educational background	1. Bachelor in Music, Philippines	1. Bachelor in Arts and Performance
	2. Bachelor in Primary Education, USA	2. Un-finished Master program
	3. Ongoing: Master Degree Program in Education, Long distance US Program	
Occupation	Primary Teacher, NA International School, Jakarta	Primary Teacher, NB International School, Jakarta

**Angel** was born and raised in Metro Manila 46 years ago. Metro Manila is the capital city of Philippines. She grew up and had her education from primary to college level at that city. When she was 23 years old, she went

abroad to Jakarta for employment purpose and lived there for 6 years. During the time she met her future American husband at work place. From Jakarta, she then moved to the United States with her husband and resided there for 14 years. Afterward, she came back to Jakarta with her husband and 2 sons and currently has been staying in Jakarta for 4 years.

**Ray** was born in North Cotabato, Mindanao 31 years ago. During the first 5 years of his life, he lived with his paternal grandparents in this area and Afterward, he moved to General Santos city at South Cotabato to reunite with his nuclear family. He grew up and had her primary and secondary education in this city. Then, he went to Davao city for his higher education. Currently he has been living in Jakarta for 6 years.

Findings and discussions

Angel’s language use

a) Languages at home

Angel paternal grandparents are from northern Philippines and spoke dialect language *Ibanag*. Her father and his siblings speak Ibanag and a little bit of Tagalog. Her maternal grandparents spoke Spanish, English and Ilocano. No Tagalog. Their home default language is Ilocano. Her mother speaks Ilocano with her siblings.

Table 2  
Angel’s Linguistic Repertoire

Period	Dominant (Default) language	2 <sup>nd</sup> language	3 <sup>rd</sup> language
Born to 5 years	Tagalog	English	Ilocano
School years: 5 - 23 Years	English	Tagalog	
Overseas: Indonesia 23-29 years	English	Bahasa Indonesia	Tagalog
United States: 29 - 43 years	English	Tagalog	
Indonesia: 43 years to now	English	Bahasa Indonesia	Tagalog

Angel’s parents were college friends that met each other in a University in Metro Manila. Angel explained their background as follows:

*My mom was born and raised in Ilocos Norte and my dad was born and raised in Cagayan Valley. Both are provinces in Northern Luzon in the Philippines. They both went to*

*Manila to go to university. That's where they met. ...When my parents went to school in Manila, that's where they met and they speak in Tagalog. Because they lived in Manila and everybody spoke Tagalog or Filipino so that's when they spoke Tagalog.*

Angel and her siblings were brought up using Tagalog as the dominant language at home. She considers Tagalog as her mother tongue. However, her mother also spoke English to her children as she was an English teacher. She also exposed her children with English books, introduced the children to English rhymes and songs when they were very young at pre-school age. Their maternal grandmother lived with them and as she was not able to speak other than the *Illocano* dialect and passive knowledge of Tagalog. Angel described her relationship with *Illocano* language as follows:

*...my grandparent were staying with us when we grew up, she didn't speak English. She didn't go to school. So we all spoke Tagalog to her but she spoke in Illocano. ...When my parent and grand parent talked to each other, they spoke Illocano. We just pick words. We don't really speak it. But we can say like, "I'm hungry" ... you know, things like that.*

Angel's communication with her grandparent was quite unique. Both Angel (with her passive knowledge of *Illocano*) and grandparent (with her passive knowledge of Tagalog) can still communicate with each other's language, thinking in two languages. When ask if she and her siblings also speak her paternal grandparents' language *Ibanag*, she explained that she can understand a little. In addition, the language use between siblings is Tagalog and English. This is probably due to how the two languages are functioning as official languages at school.

#### b) Languages at school

Philippines has more than 100 spoken languages which are divided into three major regions, *Ilocanos* at the north, Tagalog at the central, Visayan at the south (Headland, 2003). The Government has regulated two official languages, i.e, Filipino (formerly known as Tagalog) and English. English is also language of medium of instruction in all Philippines islands (Ledesma & Morris, 2005). According to Borlongan (2009) survey on language use in Philippine, Tagalog is the preferred home language follows by English. However, other vernaculars (namely Cebuano, Bicolano, Taglish, Chinese and Japanese) is still used at homes of the Philippines. It

was also found that in every domain, English is the most preferred language in Philippines for young people.

As mentioned above, English, in the Philippines, has been adopted as the medium of instruction. As such English is the language at school but Angel explained her use of languages at school as follows:

*When it was a play time we speak Tagalog ya, but when we were in classroom we speak English. No ... ya... ya... we speak both I think. Ya, when in English class. You know like we have Math, we have English and we have Science, during English class you are supposed to speak only in English.*

Although English has an institutional function at school as the language of academic activities, the local language has a social function for the students outside the classroom. The languages at school co-exist in different sub-domains of the school setting.

#### c) Language at church

In addition to languages used at home and school, English is also the language use at church. Angela describes the linguistic environment surround her as follows:

*We go to church, the mass is in English, we go to restaurants, the menus are all in English. So, English is all around us.*

As Angela explained, English seem to also have quite a wider existence in her local context. From her narratives, it can be assumed that Angel grew up with 4 languages in which 3 languages actively spoken in her house, Tagalog, English and Ilocano. She confirms that she has lived in a multilingual home as she described in her own words, “*So there is a lot of languages in our house floating around.*”

When she got married, Angel moved to United States to live with his American husband at the age of 29 years. They stayed there for 13 years and have 2 sons. During that time Angel shared that she spoke only English and a very little Tagalog – only when she met and hang out with her Filipino friends. Angel has only 1 sibling who lives in Philippines while the other siblings are living in United States, Guam and Jakarta. She mentioned that nowadays she communicates with siblings mostly in English since most of them lived abroad and mostly functioned with English as the medium of communication. Communicating in mostly English among siblings may seem to be the natural mode.

Ray’s Language use

a) Language at home

Ray’s paternal grandparents spoke Karay-A and their home default language was Karay-A. His maternal grandparents spoke Illongo and their home default language was Illongo. Both of Ray’s parents speak English and Filipino. Filipino is the national language that is derived from Tagalog.

Table 3  
Ray’s Linguistic Repertoire

Period	Dominant (Default) language	2 <sup>nd</sup> language	3 <sup>rd</sup> language	4 <sup>th</sup> language	5 <sup>th</sup> language
0 - 5 years	Karay'A				
5 - 6 years	Ilongo	Karay'A			
School years	Illongo	English	Tagalog	Karay'A	
University: 18 years	English	Cebuano	Tagalog	Illongo	Karay'A
Overseas: 25years to now	English	Bahasa Indonesia	Tagalog	Illonog	Karay'A

Ray and all of the family then live in General Santos city where language of the community is Illongo. However, since both grandparents from both side lived in one house together, their default home languages are both Illongo and Karay-A. Ray stated both languages are used equally in spoken language. They often code switched but mostly inter-sentential code switching in nature as explained by Ray:

*At home we talk in two languages, Illonggo and Karay-a. For example when we say “good morning” in Illongo “mayani ad law” in Karay-A, it’s almost the same “ma ayung ad law” ... Both my parents, their language, we call it default language at home is mixed Illonggo and Karay-a. ... It’s kind of a mix, whatever the conversation is, when it start with Illongo then we talk with Illongo, when they start in Karay-a, I will also talk in Karay-a.*

Between siblings, Ray talks in English and Tagalog, and frequently they talk in Illongo or Karay-A. Here is the excerpt of his explanation:

*Between siblings, we talked in English and Tagalog... because most of my siblings, they also studied so once in a while we talked in English. English, Tagalog. ...Sometimes, but, seldom, we talked in Illongo or Karay-a because our neighbors spoke Illongos.*

The interaction among siblings takes place in English. From the excerpt above, it can be seen that English has been very influential for those who went to school.

#### b) Language at school

Similar to Angel, the medium of instruction at school is English, except for the Tagalog subject. Although Ray resided in the area where the community language is not Tagalog but Illongo, it is interesting to find that the languages used at his school are Tagalog (the national language) and English. Here is the excerpt of Ray's explanation on that issue:

*Generally at school we used Tagalog and English. It's standard form in the classroom, we talk with friends with Tagalog and English. Why? .... because some of my friend are not talking in Illongo and not in Karay-a. They come from different places. So for us in order to talk in united we will talk with either English or Tagalog.*

English is given an institutionalized function as the language of education. All learning activities and interactions (teacher-student and student-student) inside of the classroom have to be done in English. Besides English, Tagalog was used as a lingua franca to accommodate students who came from other parts of the Philippines. Similar to Indonesia, Tagalog in this context was used as the language of unity.

After finishing the secondary level school, Ray then had his higher education in Davao city. The language of this community is Cebuano. He acquired and spoke Cebuano when he lived there for 5 years.

*But for Cebuano, I know it ... that's a dialect in Davao .... most of my classmates in University are Cebuanos so I've tried to adopt their language and I also talk in Cebuano.*

During his study in Davao, he learned and acquired Cebuano, the dominant language in the area, to be able to function in that particular community.



### c) Language at church

Similar to Angel, church community is an important part of Ray's life. In this particular domain, another language use was in practice. As Ray resided in a community that speaks Illongo in General Santos city, the lingua franca in this part is the National language, Filipino. Ray described the language practice at church as follows:

*We talk in Filipino at church because people are coming from different places or when we have guest that we cannot talk in our default language we talk in Filipino.*

Ray's narrative above emphasizes how Filipino is the language that serves the purpose for a wider communication across the country. Being a multilingual and multicultural country, a lingua franca is needed to be able to connect with other members in different parts of the Philippines. The default language for this purpose is the Filipino.

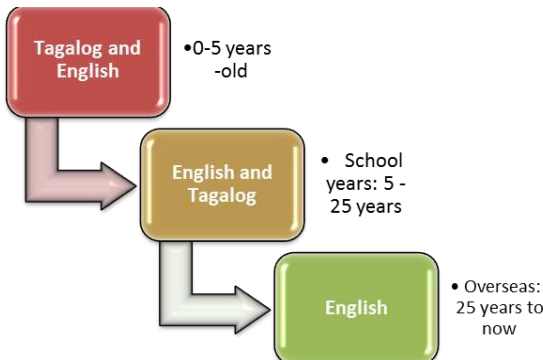
Both Angel and Ray are quite mobile, moving from one place to another within and outside of the country. They adjusted their language practice by learning and acquiring the local language and/or the dominant language of the new place that they resided in. Both participants are currently residing in Jakarta. Angel has been living in Jakarta for 3 years now but she lived in Jakarta for around 6 years around 15 years ago. Ray has been living in Jakarta for 6 years now. Based on my long observation and communication with both of them at church, I witnessed both of them speaking or interacting with *Bahasa Indonesia* moderately well. Angela and Ray can perform basic communications with waiters at shop or house assistants or drivers using *Bahasa Indonesia* for basic daily functions. Therefore, I can conclude that *Bahasa Indonesia* has become one additional language in their language repertoire.

### Shifting of dominant language

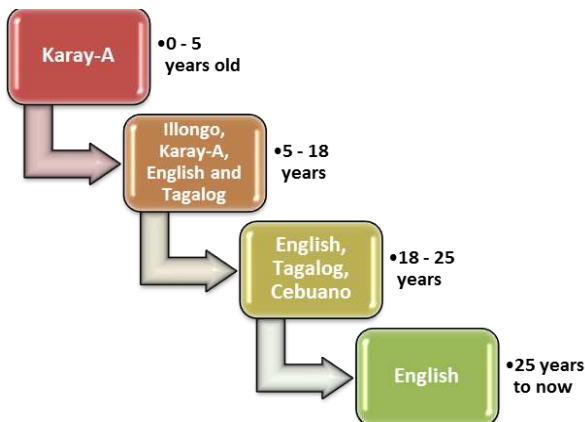
Both participants have experienced shifting their dominant languages along their lives accordingly to their place of residence and intense or intimate involvement within a particular domain (namely home, school, and church). Angel's parents introduced her with Tagalog and English during her early period of life. And, she claims that her mother tongue is Tagalog. She has shifted the sequences of her dominant language during her school life into English as the main language follows by Tagalog. In her adult time – having to move to Indonesia, then to United States, and back to Indonesia – she resort to English more often than Tagalog due to little access to

Tagalog-speaking domain in these contexts. Therefore, Angel has experienced dominant language shift several times in significant points of her life as described in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1**  
Angel’s dominant language shift



**Figure 2**  
Ray’s dominant language shift



Similarly, Ray was exposed to Karay-A during the first 5 years of his life when he lived with his paternal grandparents. From 5 years onwards his dominant language shift into Illongo and Karay-A when he moved to General Santos city. However, Illongo is more dominant in his life because it is the language of the community. During his university years his dominant language has shifted to English and Tagalog as he moved to and resided in another area, Davao, that speak Cebuano. At the age of 25, he decided to live abroad to teach in an English-speaking school and resided in Jakarta, Indonesia. At this working context, the dominant language is English. Thus, Ray also operates with English and acquires basic *Bahasa*

*Indonesia*. The dominant language shift that Ray's experienced can be illustrated in Figure 2.

### ***Language dynamics***

Myers-Scotton (2003) argues that there is never one factor or set of factors can predicts language maintenance or shift. However, socio-economic mobility can promote language shift (p. 105). Both Angel and Ray have started operating with several languages when they stepped outside their home and started to have other social circles outside of their home: the local neighborhood and school. Interestingly, at school, both participants experienced English as the language for academic activities and the local language and/or Tagalog was used as the language for social function among peers. The languages operate with different contexts and statuses: English is used in a more formal context of use in their lives (language of educational purposes), Tagalog is also used in formal and socio-political contexts such as at church, school, and for wider communication (national language, language of unity, lingua franca), local languages is used in their personal lives such as at home and social circles (family, peers, local community). Both participants felt very strongly that multilingual practice is the common practice in their linguistics experiences in the Philippines. However, as they moved abroad, it is quite a challenge for them to maintain the languages they acquired in their home country.

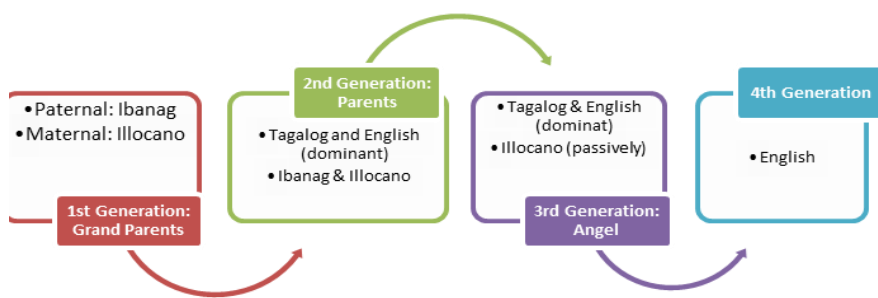
Myers-Scotton (2003) points out two possible outcomes when people become multilinguals that are whether they will maintain the languages or they will abandon some languages or possibly becomes monolingual. If we look at from the inter-generational aspect, there is an indication of language shift took place at both participants lives. Both of the participants' family experienced shifting of dominant language(s) starting from the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation (their parents). The 1<sup>st</sup> generation spoke different dominant language than the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation.

In Angel's family, her father and mother has shifted their respective mother tongue (Ibanag and Ilocano) and speak Tagalog to their children (3<sup>rd</sup> generation). The third generation has limited passive knowledge of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation languages (only at word level). This can be assumed that language of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation is nearly lost in the life of the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation. As to now, Angel describes that she speaks mostly English in her current living context, and does not pass-on Tagalog to her children. Therefore, Tagalog is already lost in the 4<sup>th</sup> generation. When she was asked whether she used Tagalog with her children, she answered:

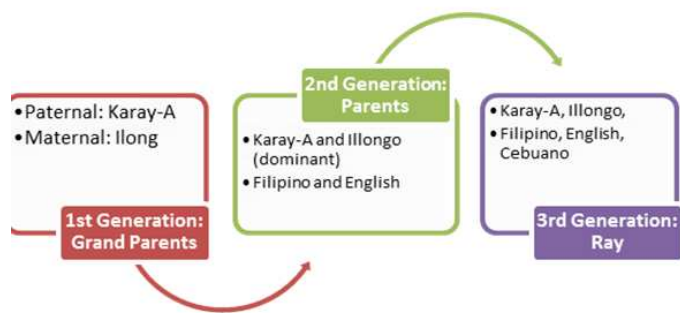
*...my kids don't speak Tagalog. I didn't teach them because we don't live in a place that need it. They speak Bahasa [Indonesia] now because of the school.*

Angel’s reason for not using Tagalog with her children is also driven from the contextual communication needs in her current residence. It is considered to be more practical for her children to acquire the language of their immediate domains (i.e. school and local community). Her children, therefore, acquire English and *Bahasa Indonesia*. Tagalog is no longer presence in the fourth generation current life.

**Figure 4**  
Angel’s family shifting of language use pattern



**Figure 5**  
Ray’s family shifting of language use pattern



In Ray’s family, the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation keeps and pass-on the language of 1<sup>st</sup> generation (Karay-A and Illongo) to Ray’s generation. This is supported also by the fact that the language is also the language of the community they live in. Similar to Angel, Ray also acquire English and Filipino as the language of education and lingua franca. Ray’s high mobility also influences his decision to acquire another language – Cebuano. However, Ray was not

certain whether later in life when he had any children that he would pass on Illongo to the next generation. He described this as follows:

*Interviewer: When you are married, do you intend to teach your children Illongo?*

*Ray: I think I prefer, whatever they are trained in School we'll have it at home. I prefer my own language but if my future wife has her own language then that's the time we will be going to talk about what will be the default language we will use [at home].*

Ray's response seem to somewhat similar with Angel's in which the focus is on the languages that the children will need to use the most in their immediate domains.

## Conclusion

Grosjean (2010, p. 29) points out that different aspects of life often require different languages. Multilinguals or bilinguals use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life and with different people. Both participants in this study use their languages in accordance to the purpose and domains of life. Language use in home domain is different from the one use in school domain. Language use when talking to parents is different from language use to talk with siblings. In their later life as expats in Indonesia, English has become the dominant language in most parts of their lives (especially professional, personal life at home, church, and social circles) as there is little domain of use for their previously acquired languages in the Philippines.

Multilinguals such like the participants of this study may shift their dominant language because of their flexibility to use language of the big community where they live in at the time. This shift may be to get access that benefited to their current life (Dewaele & Li Wei, 2003). This consideration has been very relevant to Angel's and Ray's realities in Jakarta, Indonesia.

There is an indication of language shift at the fourth generation. Language of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation obviously was lesser used by the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation with English intensively used by the family members (between siblings of 3<sup>rd</sup> generation). Angel admits that she did not pass her parents languages to the children due to lack of domain and opportunity to use those languages in their children's immediate context. Therefore, the 1<sup>st</sup> generations languages has no longer presence in the fourth generation lives.

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