

FILIPINO DOMESTIC WORKER ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article provides a description of the distinctive phonological, lexical, and grammatical features of ‘Filipino domestic worker English’. Data for this linguistic description consist of recordings of interactions between Filipino domestic workers and their employers’ children from Hong Kong and Singapore. The phonology of Filipino domestic worker English still resembles Philippine English, yet with much richer inventory of sounds than basilectal Philippine English. But at the suprasegmental level, Filipino domestic workers attempt to approximate that of the local English. Lexical borrowings between Filipino domestic workers and their employers’ children are common, but borrowings from children to worker are overwhelmingly more frequent. In terms of grammar, there are a few noticeable idiosyncrasies in Filipino domestic workers English, but most especially in agreement, tense, and adverbs. English(es) is being acquired, learned, and used in these societies with a greater probability through Filipino domestic workers at home. It is important that the language use of these workers be on the agenda of researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, educators, and other stakeholders in the migration process.

Keywords: Transnational domestic workers, Philippine English, world Englishes, migration linguistics, labor migration

1. Introduction

The so-called ‘age of migration’ (de Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020) has highlighted the importance of language amongst the various sociocultural changes as a consequence of globalization and migration. Particularly, in the migration process, languages (and their varieties) have become not only an interesting dimension but more importantly a crucial aspect of it. Borlongan (in press) goes further by saying that language is the ‘heart of migration’, and that it plays a very important role in the whole migration process. As such, he has proposed that language in migratory contexts be carefully studied, and that a sub-discipline of linguistics and applied linguistics be specially devoted to it, that which he calls ‘migration linguistics’. The focus of this article is a specific case of transnational labor migration and the language varieties in contact and the supposed language variety emerging in that particular case. This linguistically interesting case of transnational labor migration is that of Filipino women working as transnational domestic workers and the alleged emerging sociolect resulting from this transnational movement.

Filipino domestic workers (FDWs) have become a common feature in many middle- to upper-class households in East Asia, Middle East, and Southeast Asia, particularly towards the end of twentieth century. While “[b]y and large, domestic work, which can include child and elderly care, cleaning, cooking and other tasks connected to taking care of the family, is lowly paid, devalued and considered to be unskilled work” (Lorente, 2018, p. 13), households which have FDWs have been largely dependent on them and, specially, children in these households receive substantial amount of care and spend an inordinate amount of time with FDWs, which even rival the amount of care and time they receive from their parents (Vilog & Borlongan, 2019). Aside from having comparatively higher educational attainment than domestic workers of other nationalities, Filipinos working as domestic workers, owing largely to English being a dominant language in the Philippines, have higher levels of English language proficiency in comparison with their peers, and, as such, are often more preferred by employers (Lorente, 2018). And it has been asked whether the English language input FDWs provide their employers’ children have an (negative) effect on the latter’s English language proficiency. Quite a number of developmental psycholinguistic studies (Leung, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014; Leung & Young-Scholten, 2013) have sought to answer that question and they found that FDWs do not affect the English language use of their employers’ children. If at all, these children are afforded more exposure to English by these FDWs, and even made aware of Englishes beyond theirs (Vilog & Borlongan, 2019).

2. Aims and Methods

The aim of this article is to provide a linguistic description of the English used by FDWs, or, quite possibly, ‘Filipino domestic worker English’. In particular, this article describes the distinctive phonological, lexical, and grammatical features of this Philippine English sociolect of interest.

The basis for this linguistic description is an expansion of the data collected by Vilog and Borlongan for their 2019 on FDWs. Their study was a mixed-method study of language attitudes, ideologies, and use and they already have four-hours worth recordings of interactions between FDWs and their employers’ children from Hong Kong and Singapore. An addition of recordings two hours longer than the earlier dataset should make the linguistic description contained in this article richer. At the center of these interactions (and the actual data collected for the 2019 Vilog and Borlongan study as well as this one) are naturally-occurring conversations, exchanges between the FDWs and their employers’ children when they are alone at home. The contexts of these interactions and conversations are usually the times when the FDWs are feeding these children, playing with them or simply watching over them. The impression upon listening to the recordings is that they were quite naturalistic and not contrived. The recordings were transcribed as necessary for the phonological, lexical, and grammatical analysis done for this article.

FDWs constitute what in social research is called ‘special population’ or ‘potentially vulnerable groups’, and data relating to them are not only hard to come by but immensely confidential and sensitive in nature that any piece of (additional) data from them is always valuable and worthwhile research-wise. Linguistically, but most specially sociolinguistically, it is

encouraging to dwell on the possible emergence of this Philippine English sociolect among these transnational laborers as they negotiate their own English with the fairly established and stable Englishes of their destination countries and territories (in the case of the FDWs serving as informants for the description given in this article, Hong Kong and Singapore). Language data from FDWs represent new and unique data different from the canonical data used in the study of Englishes which are usually the English of non-migrant population, otherwise known as autochthonous or sedentary or sedentary population, in the territory in question.

3. Phonology

First and foremost, it must be said here that the phonological description made is based on auditory judgment of what constrained data which have been procured from the informants. Also, at this point, it is helpful that the description of sounds observed in this purported sociolect of Philippine English is juxtaposed with findings of Tayao (2008). And so Table 1 presents Tayao’s consonant inventory of acrolectal Philippine English:

Table 1
Consonant Inventory of Philippine English Acrolect (Tayao, 2008, p. 172)

Manner of Articulation	Place of Articulation						
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Interdental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop	pb			t d		k g	ʔ
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ		h
Affricate					č ǰ		
Nasal	m			n		ŋ	
Lateral Liquid				l			
Retroflex Liquid				r			
Glide	w				y		

Although Tayao (2008) presented three consonant inventories corresponding to the basilectal, mesolectal, and acrolectal Philippine English, the acrolectal inventory was chosen as it exhibits the most number of consonants. Moreover, all consonants found in basilect and mesolect are also included in acrolect. It should also be noted that the symbols in Table 1 are exactly the same as the ones used by Tayao (e.g. č, ǰ).

On the other hand, Table 2 shows the consonant inventory of FDW English.

Table 2
Consonant Inventory of Filipino Domestic Worker English

Manner of Articulation	Place of Articulation							
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Interdental	Alveolar	Post-Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop	pb			t d			k g	ʔ
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Tap				r				
Affricate						tʃdʒ		
Nasal	m			n			ŋ	
Lateral Approximant				l				
Approximant				ɹ		j		
Glide	w							

As seen above, FDW English consists of 26 consonants, nine (9) of which are voiceless and 17, voiced. The number of consonants in FDW English exceeds that of acrolectal Philippine English (25 consonants) and equals that of General American English (26 consonants).

Previous scholars, such as Tayao (2008) characterized /r/ in Philippine English as ‘trilled’ and in General American English as ‘retroflex liquid’. However, the data reveal that FDW English exhibits both forms of the rhotic consonant. Although a closer articulatory investigation would be needed, it is posited in the mean time that a tap, instead of a trill, is perceived alongside the retroflex liquid. The voiced alveolar tap [r] appears in words such as *irritating*, *circle*, *thirty*, and *debris*. On the other hand, voiced alveolar approximant [ɹ] appears in words such as *underwear* (both syllable-final positions), *brush*, *drink*, *later*, and *wrinkled*.

Tayao (2008) also mentioned that Philippine English users oftentimes substitute General American English palatal affricate /tʃ/ in the initial position with /ts/. However, data revealed otherwise, as all tokens such as the following were pronounced by FDWs using a voiceless palatal affricate: *Charge*, *check*, *chicken*, and *chopsticks*,

Quite commonly, Filipinos are also expected to mispronounce /f/, substituting /p/ in English words instead (cf. Tayao, 2008). Nonetheless, as far as the data revealed, FDW English has no showing of this substitution such as in the following words: *Finish*, *first*, *food*, *full*, and *cough*. On the other hand, /θ/ is fairly consistent, as in *everything*, *thing*, and *bath*, where it is expected to be substituted by /t/. It is sometimes observed in Philippine English that words exhibiting the /θ/ sound as if /t/ or the aspirated version of it is in place instead. To some degree, these observations establish an affinity between FDW English and Standard Philippine English in terms of pronunciation.

Finally, there are some doubts in the consistency of /ð/. Specifically for the words *this*, *that*, and *then*; the voiced interdental fricative may sometimes appear as /d/. This is also a common observation for Philippine English.

Meanwhile, Figure 1 displays the vowel inventory of the mesolectal variety of Philippine English from Tayao (2008: 173), which is also the same as the vowel inventory of FDW English, as observed from the recordings of interactions between FDWs and their employers' children.

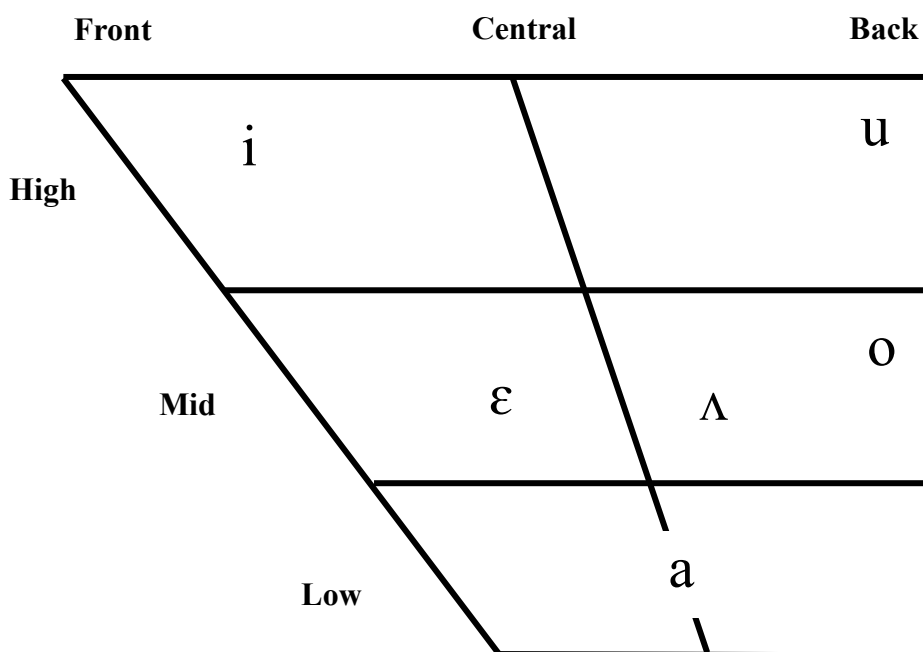


Figure 1. Vowel Inventory of Mesolectal Philippine English and Filipino Domestic Worker English

One noteworthy observation is that wherever /æ/ is supposed to appear, FDWs use [ε] instead, hence, the inclusion in the vowel inventory. This is true for the V1 of the following sample words: *happy*, *magic*, and *shampoo*. This suggests that [ε] is most probably a merger, taking on the roles of both /æ/ and /ε/, as far as FDW English concerned.

Impressionistically, beyond the individual sounds observed, FDWs were noted for their occasional speech rhythm shift from one which resembles Philippine English to that which is similar to either Hong Kong English or Singapore English. This is characterized by speaking in a staccato fashion, seemingly mirroring the speech rhythm of the children taken care of by them. Nevertheless, the shift mostly occurs towards the end of the sentence, usually in the ultimate word. At this point, however, the peculiarities of Hong Kong English and Singapore English are not taken into account yet, rather, only the more general characteristic of resembling Chinese in terms of rhythm.

(1) Can you finish your food so we can play monopoly?

(2) You take all the money.

In (1) and (2), the words *monopoly* and *money* exhibit the phenomenon stated above. While the elements before these two words are unmistakably orthodox English sounding as uttered, *monopoly* and *money* shift to being syllable-timed. Regularly, *monopoly* is stressed on the second syllable and *money*, on the penultimate. However, for the case of FDW English, the stress was not auditorily apparent and each syllable were perceived to have almost equal lengths.

4. Lexicon

Exchange of lexical items between the FDWs and the children under their care was also common. This similar to the process of borrowing, which Bautista (1997) described as one strategy which Philippine English — and all other Englishes as well — uses to expand its lexicon and also the type of exchange of lexical items referring to local objects or concepts which Schneider (2003, 2007) described as typical of early contact between settler and indigenous population at the onset of transplantation of a new English. More specifically, FDWs contribute words from Philippine languages, but most especially Tagalog, whilst their employers' children words from the local languages, although both of them use English as the language of their conversations.

For instance, an FDW from Hong Kong uses the Tagalog word *wiwi* 'urine/urinate' to ask whether the child needs to do so. Singaporean children also comprehend a few Tagalog words such as *gwapo* 'handsome' and *pangit* 'ugly'. They also use *tita* to refer to the FDW, which is analogous to the common Singapore honorific *auntie*. It is noted, however, that, while there is lexical exchange between FDWs and the children, the source is almost always the children's local English and/or language rather than that of the FDW.

Data from Hong Kong informants show a more frequent transfer of lexical items and expressions from Cantonese into English. For example, *jie jie* 'female domestic helper' is commonly used by the FDWs themselves, as well as Hong Kong families, to refer to domestic workers. They also use common phrases such as *jo mei ah* 'what are you doing' and *m goi* 'thank you/please'. There is also a preponderance of Cantonese kinship terms such as *sai lou* 'younger brother'. Furthermore, some FDWs can communicate with their employers' children in successive inter-sentential code-switches from Cantonese and then to English, or vice-versa.

- (3) Princess Anna, Elsa m goi ya ya, jie jie hao ma.
 Princess Anna, Elsa thank you (Chi) female domestic helper (Tgl)female
 domestic helper (Chi) good (Chi)
 (4) Sai lou bye bye, see you later!
 younger brother goodbye see you later

Emphatic Singapore English such as *lah*, *meh*, and *ah*, which convey various pragmatic meanings were also adopted by the FDWs. These sentence-final emphatic particles presumably of Cantonese origin are ubiquitous in both Hong Kong and Singapore data. Of these, *lah* and *ah* have the highest occurrences. In other instances, the following particles or expressions also

appeared: *Aiyoh* for expressing displeasure, *na* for offering something to someone, and *alamak*, a Malay expression which indicates a person's shock over something.

It is possible that the more frequent code-switching occurs among Hong Kong informants due to the fact that Hong Kong citizens whom they live with speak English less than their Singaporeans counterparts. As such, the Hong Kong FDWs exposure to Cantonese is higher, compared to the Singapore FDWs.

5. Grammar

In terms of grammar, utterances are also principally in the non-past tense, even if the FDWs are talking about things in the past. In one of the conversations between an FDW and a Singaporean child, the following expressions are found:

- (5) She chase me [...] so he go chase the girl also.
- (6) What happen to your hands? [They have] become (like those of an) uncle.
- (7) You buy it?

Aside from the tense being problematic, (5) also exhibits two instances of agreement discord — the verbs *chase* and *go* do not agree with the number of the subjects *she* and *he* respectively. Similarly, this is also found in (8) and (9), where the head noun is not affixed with the pluralizing morpheme *-s* and the plural verb does not follow suit:

- (8) The two card is mine.
- (9) Many student is there.

The placement of the adverbs *already* and *only* sentence-finally, said to be characteristic of Philippine English (cf. Gonzalez, 1985), is also found in FDW English:

- (10) Who you want to listen only?
- (11) Maybe tomorrow you can sleep with us already.
- (12) It is school holiday only.
- (13) You eat already.

These are considered to be translations of the Tagalog clitic particles *lang* and *na*, and since meshing of the syntactic rules of Tagalog and English may be subconsciously straining, the end of the utterance “seems like an easy slot to plug [them] in”, according to Bautista (1982, p. 385).

Imperative constructions in English typically drop the subject *you*, characteristically beginning with the base form of the verb as in *Read this*. However, the subject of the imperative is realized in various tokens in the English of FDWs, as in those exemplified below:

- (14) You finish your food.
- (15) You drink water.
- (16) You kiss *jie jie*.

(17) Okay, you eat.

While the above statements are not grammatically incorrect, they seem to be a reflection of being accustomed to the prototypical English SVO sentence pattern, where the subject must always begin the utterance. And to an ordinary English speaker, these constructions may not sound very usual.

There also appears to be some confusion regarding the use of articles. In the following sentences, the null article is used in the absence of an indefinite article:

(18) It's not θ public holiday.

(19) You sing θ song.

Conversely, the indefinite article appears in utterances with a definite nominal as in (20) and a plural nominal as in (21):

(20) It's a Teacher's Day.

(21) It's a bad words.

Peculiarities in terms of agreement, as exhibited by (5), (6), (7), (8), and (9), and tense as shown by (5), (6), and (7), were previously described by Bautista (1982) as also characteristic of the English used by domestic workers in the Philippines. FDWs in both Hong Kong and Singapore reflect these observations, although the frequency is notably higher for the latter. This can be attributed to the nature of the audio recordings, wherein Singapore FDWs have lengthier conversations with their employees' children than Hong Kong FDWs.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This article provided a description of the distinctive phonological, lexical, and grammatical features of FDW English. The phonology of FDW English still resembles Philippine English, yet with much richer inventory of sounds than basilectal Philippine English. But at the suprasegmental level, FDWs attempt to approximate that of the local English. Lexical borrowings between FDWs and their employers' children are common, but borrowings from children to worker are overwhelmingly more frequent. In terms of grammar, there are a few noticeable idiosyncrasies in FDW English, but most especially in agreement, tense, and adverbs.

At this point, it is worth asking the question: To which is the English used by FDWs closer? To Philippine English or to the local English of their destination country? As far as phonological properties are concerned, FDW English can be confidently classified as resembling Philippine English closely. In terms of consonant count (26), it is close to the acrolectal Philippine English, notwithstanding the allophonic variation of /r/. And for vowel count (6), it is the same as Philippine English mesolect. This affinity with Philippine English is also apparent in the rhythmic pattern — although there are instances of staccato manner of speaking, more than half of the tokens of speech are undoubtedly Philippine English-sounding, especially to users well-versed with the new English. Instances which incline slightly to Hong

Kong or Singapore English (or their colloquial subvarieties) are sparse, not to mention, unpredictable at this point. It is also apparent that FDW English has several lexical borrowings from Cantonese, Mandarin, Malay, and Hokkien; however, partly, the lexical tokens are limited and, much more, they are limited to certain conceptual categories such as kinship, emphatic particles, and daily expressions. Thus said, these borrowings are yet to be confirmed as largely productive to be deemed as a stable process in the emergence of FDW English. And so, from this perspective, the lexical items in FDW English are still characteristically Philippine English rather than Hong Kong or Singapore English. Grammatically, specifically citing the deviations from the purported ‘standard English’, FDW English mirrors the peculiarities of Philippine English. Issues relating to subject-verb agreement, number, and definiteness are characteristic of Philippine English, as also posited by Bautista (1982) for English of domestic workers in the Philippines. It should be noted here that there is almost a one-to-one correspondence between the features this article has identified as FDW and the features Bautista identified for the English of domestic workers in the Philippines. If there is any difference, it is in the confidence of FDWs in Hong Kong and Singapore to use English, certainly because there is no other language to use in communicating with their employers’ children — or the employers’ themselves and the society at large — except English; hence, they appear to be more comfortable in using English than the domestic workers in the Philippines who overwhelmingly use a Philippine language in fulfilling their work responsibilities. And so, to answer the question on the basis of data available, FDW English remains characteristically Philippine English though they make attempts to approximate colloquial local English. This attempt to approximate the local English, particularly the colloquial subvariety, is in the fashion which Giles (1973) classically refers to as ‘communication accommodation’. As Vilong and Borlongan reveal, while FDWs take pride in the ‘good English’ they speak/use, they adapt to the (colloquial) local English primarily to be understood better not only by their employers’ children but also their employers and the society.

The ultimate question to ask therefore is: What is FDW English? This definition is proposed for the sociolect described in this article: *Filipino domestic worker English is a sociolect of Philippine English which these workers use in fulfilling their occupational responsibilities, most especially when communicating with their employers and their employers’ children and elderly. FDW English is a continuum which approximates the colloquial local English at one end and mesolectal/basilectal Philippine English at the other end. Though used as a way of accommodating to their employers’ family and the locality as well, FDW English is, for most of the time, still much closer to (mesolectal/basilectal) Philippine English than to the colloquial local English.*

In Martin’s (2014) concentric circles of Philippine English, the English of FDWs belong to the outer circle, those who use English primarily for instrumental reasons. But she says that those who belong to Philippine English’ outer circle are “either powerless to support these languages [Philippine English and its varieties] and/or ambivalent about promoting them” (p. 55). In general, FDWs have the power to influence and, at least, tell their employers’ children about English and also about Philippine English in particular, making these children aware of a legitimized variety of English in the Philippines. Again, this treatise on the emergence of this

sociolect referred to by this article as FDW English goes to show that there is variation within Philippine English (Lee & Borlongan, 2023), that there are indeed Englishes in the Philippines (Gonzales, 2017), and that Philippine English is moving further in its evolution (Borlongan, 2016). It could also be added that FDW English is a fine example of what Meierkord (2012) calls as ‘Interactions across Englishes’, “the different Englishes potentially merge in these interactions and that this, also potentially, result in the development of new emergent varieties” (p. 2). These FDWs go to these destination countries with their (basilectal/mesolectal) Philippine English. Then they get exposed to the colloquial local English in their destination countries. And so the resulting variety they use is the continuum between these two, and Meierkord rightly predicts, it is “not [...] one stable or even codified variety, but rather a heterogenous array of new linguistic systems” (p. 2) [emphasis original].

In 1982, Bautista investigated on *yaya* English, or the English used by nursemaids of children from affluent families in Manila. Her study was one of the earlier works on Philippine English, and the first to document a less educated sub-variety. She provides an interesting overview of the sub-variety: It is “a kind of English that is a composite of the little English originally learned in a *barrio* [rural neighborhood] school, the English picked up from the mass media and from an urban setting, and the stock expressions acquired from living with a high or middle income family. These are the features of what can be called the unschooled variety of Philippine English, or the English spoken by the Filipino who is not at home in English” (p. 378). It is tempting to juxtapose the FDWs in this study and the nursemaids in Bautista’s; after all, the nature of their work and the interactions which have been the focus of this article are very similar at first glance. However, caution is given to making such parallelisms for a few reasons: First, overseas FDWs have had higher educational attainment than the ones in the Philippines (Sayres, 2007). Second, while, indeed, the FDW English documented in this article also has a number of instances of mixing in local languages, certainly, FDWs in Hong Kong and Singapore are not very proficient in the local languages in these cities and they only pick up these words and expressions from the mixing locals do. They are definitely more fluent in English than in these languages. After all, their English language proficiency makes them more valuable than domestic workers of other nationalities (Lorente, 2018; Vilog & Borlongan, 2019). Meanwhile, domestic workers in the Philippines could easily revert to a Philippine local language (most likely, Tagalog) which they are probably more fluent in than English. And so, for these two reasons, the focus of this investigation was not conflated with that of Bautista, at least, through the lens of sociolinguistics.

Interactions between FDWs and their employers’ children are becoming more and more prevalent than ever that they have evolved to be a recognizable feature in the social fabric of the cities where data for the linguistic description in this article come from. Consequently, in the acquisition, learning, and use of not just English but all languages, these FDWs are turning or may have already turned to be an irreplaceable variable in the evolution of English(es). It is therefore quite compelling to be able to document this phenomenon, sociolinguistically as Vilog and Borlongan (2019) have done — and this article, too, from a variationist sociolinguistic perspective — as well as using different linguistic tools other scholars have earlier (e.g. Leung & Young-Scholten, 2013; Lorente, 2018), and to include them in the

theorizing and modeling of Englishes. Indeed, Kachru (1985) has his concentric circles and Schneider (2003, 2007) his evolutionary stages but, very certainly, in between and across those Kachruvian circles and Schneiderian stages are these ‘grassroots English interactions’ (cf. Schneider, 2016 on grassroots Englishes) — these FDWs informally teaching a bigger part of tomorrow’s English-using societies — which definitely alter the overall picture, and, probably, that picture will never be the same without them. That picture therefore is painted as English(es) being acquired, learned, and used in these societies with a greater probability through (Filipino) domestic workers at home.

On a more applied and migration linguistic note, it is necessary that the language use of these FDWs (specifically and migrant workers generally) be at the agenda of researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, educators, and other stakeholders in the migration process. It cannot be simply recommended here that a training program be designed and implemented for these workers. The bigger concern must be what the nature and content of these would be. Their ability to adapt not only linguistically but also sociolinguistically must be trained and honed — and also be further studied — so that not only will they be able to integrate well in their destination countries but also that they will be able to actively and positively participate in the changing dynamics of the language ecologies of their destination countries. It is on this matter and concern that the new sub-discipline of linguistics and migration linguistics called ‘migration linguistics’ be all the more relevant and necessary (Borlongan, in press).

It is compelling to end this article by quoting a FDW commenting on the English of her employers’ children; while it may be a slight overstatement but it basically sums up what impact FDWs (quite possibly) have on the English language use of their employers’ children: “The English of the children I take care of is good because of me”.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Department of English, University of Basel (Switzerland) on March 18, 2020. I wish to thank the audience for their feedback as well as Ma. Lourdes Bautista (De La Salle University, Manila, the Philippines), Christian Mair (University of Freiburg, Germany), and Stefanie Pillai (Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) but most especially Geraldine Kwek (National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) for their comments on earlier manuscripts. Dominik Heps (University of Wurzburg, Germany) assisted in the analysis for this paper. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (Japan) provided funds for the conduct of the study from which findings contained in this article have been derived. I also would like to acknowledge De La Salle University (Manila, the Philippines) and the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University for hosting me as Visiting Scholar which allowed the collection of data for and writing of this article possible.

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