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"It's cheaper to hire Filipinos and they're great English speakers": A raciolinguistic approach to labor migration in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract - Labour migration to the United Arab Emirates is racialized which manifests in the type of work, salaries, and benefits of the employees in the country. With more than 200 nationalities and spoken languages, English is the lingua franca in the global cosmopolitan UAE. With that, Filipinos both have a linguistic and racial capital in the country as they are ethnically stereotyped as fluent English speakers and are often assigned to the frontlines of their employment environments, may it be as store cashiers, office lobby attendants, call center workers, and other service-related jobs. While they do have a relative linguistic and racial capital, their position is still situated in the lower socioeconomic strata of the UAE due to their Asian identity. From a raciolinguistic perspective, this paper investigates the linguistic capital of Filipinos in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The data in this paper is derived from a larger two-year critical sociolinguistic ethnography within the Filipino community, part of which interviewed human resource managers and middle management employees in UAE companies. This study argues that raciolinguistic ideologies are extended to discourses on neoliberal labor migration as experienced by Filipino migrant workers who are treated as "cheap but fluent English speakers."

Keywords: Filipinos, English, United Arab Emirates, raciolinguistics, linguistic capital, racial capital

1. Introduction

In March 2022, I met Ahmed (pseudonym), an Egyptian migrant worker in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), through my mother who was his professor on human resources during his undergraduate stint. He is now serving as a human resource manager for a mobile telecommunications company in Dubai. As communications is central to the services that their company offers, he told me in our chat that frontline workers receiving calls and those working in their store branches are Filipinos.

> "We put Filipinos in front because of their capability to accommodate a diverse set of customers, regardless of nationality, as we can rely on their English-speaking abilities. Indians and Bangladeshis are usually in the back-end because of their technical skills and are tasked to handle applied concerns regarding faulty internet connections and the repair of routers or wiring. Arabs are always at the top (management) because they can talk to the government" (Ahmed, personal communication, 12 March 2022).

From that conversation alone, the racialization of labor in the UAE is manifested. It can be noted that certain languages are valued. English is the lingua franca of the Emirati federation whose population is at 9,282,410 consisting of more than 200 nationalities (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2020). Only 12.97% of the total population are local Emirati citizens. Despite being the

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minority, their official language Arabic holds the distinction of being the prestige language as it is the one primarily spoken by the royal families of the seven emirates.

2. Method

This paper is part of a two-year critical sociolinguistic ethnography on the political economy of language policies of Filipino migrant families in the UAE from 2021 to 2023. For the purposes of study, I extend the discourses of racialization of labor migration in the context of Filipino migrant workers by applying the raciolinguistic perspective. My positionality in this investigation is what migration scholars refer to as a 'hybrid insider-outsider'–a researcher who has spent most or a large chunk of their lives in the research setting and shares the same characteristics with the research subjects (Carling et al., 2014). In my case, my family has been living in the UAE for the past 18 years and I have been in the insider-outsider continuum for half of my life due to my constant visits and immersion in the Filipino community of the country.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1 1 Racialization of labor in the United Arab Emirates

Race is a form of capital in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as members). Specifically, in the UAE, the racialization of labor has been extensively studied in the past decade (Fernandez, 2010; Mahdavi, 2010; Goldthorpe, 2012/2014/2021; Pasha-Zaidi, 2015; Millward, 2016; Watanabe, 2020/2019). Watanabe (2020) visually encapsulates the racial hierarchization of the federation's population in the figure below. Usually, it is the local Emirati citizens and Westerners who belong to the upper socioeconomic strata. They are followed by the citizens of GCC countries at a place of relative privilege. Arabs from countries with relatively unstable economic situations, such as Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, belong to the lower socioeconomic strata along with Asians, and Africans. It is possible that within their own races, discrimination is happening as well between the small number of economically privileged people and their low-income class counterparts. This class conflict is prevalent within the Filipino community (Hosoda, 2013).

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Nationality</th><th>Social Class</th><th>Religion</th><th>Culture</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="6">Higher
↕
Lower</td><td rowspan="2">Nationals/ Westerners</td><td>Upper class</td><td rowspan="2">Muslim</td><td>Western</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Middle class</td><td rowspan="4">Non-Western</td></tr>
<tr><td>Arabs from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries</td><td>(Converts)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Arabs from non-GCC countries</td><td rowspan="3">Low-income class (includes Domestic Workers)</td><td rowspan="3">Non-Muslim</td></tr>
<tr><td>Asians</td></tr>
<tr><td>Africans</td></tr>
</table>

FIGURE 8.1 Conceptual diagram of the multi-hierarchic situation in the arab gulf societies from the viewpoint of new filipino Muslims
Note: Regarding the hierarchy of nationality, the Westerners may be situated above the nationals.
SOURCE: BY THE AUTHOR BASED ON FIELDWORK.

(Watanabe, 2020)

This is consistent with my discussions with Ahmed and other human resource managers in the UAE. A personal anecdote of this racial hierarchization in labor came from my mother who has been a professor at several business schools in the emirates of Ajman, Dubai, and Sharjah for the past 18 years. She holds a doctorate and more than three decades of industry practice and academic experience. Despite her extensive career, her stature as a citizen of the Philippines is considered lower compared to her then American colleague who held an Ivy League MBA with less than 10 years of work experience. They both held the same academic rank and salary.

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Abdullah (pseudonym), a Jordanian who works as a human resource officer for an educational institution and another former student of my mother, told me about the profiteering businesses can do due to racial hierarchization. He discussed that they do racialized hiring depending on the budget set for the salary of certain employment positions. As an example, he said, "Why hire an Emirati who requires 20,000 dirhams pay when a Syrian can do the job for 5,000 dirhams?" (Abdullah, personal communication, 12 March 2022) It is important to note that the federation implements an Emiratization policy, in which private business are required to hire a certain number of Emirati citizen to encourage their employment in the private sector. To prevent any possible breaches to the policy, they fulfill the minimum requirements (i.e. as the hiring of at least one Emirati if the company has 20 to 49 employees).

Goldthorpe (2012) and Millward (2016) refer to the racialization of labor in the UAE as 'modern day slavery' for they claim that visual markers, specifically people's skin color, are a major factor in the classification of racial hierarchies or categorizations and was influenced by the British colonization of the federation. Degorge (as cited by Millward, 2016) argued that contemporary is shaped by globalization and modernization, and that individual migrant workers in the country are entrapped by the country's *kafala* system out of economic necessity. The kafala is a sponsorship system and a form of labor market regulation wherein migrant workers are sponsored and employed by state or private institutions or a local Emirati citizen. The *kafeel* (sponsor) is responsible for the migrant worker's rightful employment, residency, and departure. Critics question this system as it may be prone to exploitation by the employers because they can unilaterally decide on the fate of the migrant worker in the country (Ngeh and Pelican, 2018). This system also limited the employment contracts and visas of migrant workers to three years. However, in 2021, the UAE government introduced the Golden Visa scheme for investors and specially-skilled workers identified by the state to be essential to economic development. This new visa scheme allows migrant workers to have a long-term visa (from 5 to 10 years) and not be tied up with any employer. Despite this, there is still no security of tenure for the holders of Golden Visa as the employers still limit the contracts of migrant workers to three years.

Ziadah (2021) considers the *kafala* system as a structured institution of control and a method of the state to do surveillance on both citizens and non-citizens alike but highlights the power of local Emiratis over migrant workers at the same time. Fernandez (2021), meanwhile, argues that the racialized hierarchies of difference of the *kafala* system is foundational to the economic and political structure of the UAE as it expands the prospects of neoliberal capitalist accumulation by expropriating migrant labor through racialized institutional humiliation. Parekh (as cited by Fernandez, 2021, p. 4350) defined institutional humiliation as the "entanglements of race, gender, citizenship, and migration within the *kafala*." Fernandez (p. 4357) further added that the deliberate architecture of racialized exclusion based on citizenship is predicated on the construction of negatively racialized migrant 'other' and according power and privilege to 'Whiteness' in the non-European and non-white context of the UAE.

The researcher argues that this racialized exclusion extends to the linguistic situation in the federation through the inequalities of multilingualism. Tupas (2014) claims that the inequalities of multilingualism stemmed from the colonially induced hatred towards mother tongues as reverence for the English language exists in former British and American colonies. In practice, the UAE encourages multiculturalism, and multilingualism by extension, through a 'tolerance' approach as spearheaded by its country's founding father Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence, 2023). Although more than 200 languages are spoken throughout the country, the inequalities of multilingualism persist in the ascribed value of Arabic and English as prestige languages that socially stratifies and minoritizes migrant workers who are non-speakers.

3.1.2 Racialization of and through linguistic practices and ideologies

Fishman (1997), early on, realized that discourses on race and ethnicity were overlooked variables in the studies of the sociology of language. Ashcroft (2001) reminds us that prior to the emergence of race as a category of physiological discrimination, language was used in the process of 'othering' during Europe's colonial expansion when Christopher Columbus, in 1492, mistakenly gave information that the population in the Caribbean island of Canibales (no one can specifically identify where the specific island is now) ate intruders. Hence, the emergence of the term *cannibal*. Alim (2016) sought

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to bridge the imagined divergence between race and language and has, since then, co-edited two books – namely *Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas About Race* (Oxford University Press, 2016) and *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Race* (Oxford University Press, 2020) – "in order to gain a better understanding of language and the process of racialization" (Alim et al., 2020). Relatively speaking, there is still a dearth of academic literature in the racializing processes of language and linguistic practices as it is deeply entrenched in existing colonial ideologies and policies. As dialogues on decolonization became more common in the past decade, it is now more important for us to contribute to the emerging discourses on raciolinguistics. This paper seeks to fulfill the void by pioneering the application of the raciolinguistic perspective in the Global South contexts of Filipino migrant workers.

It was Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa who first coined the term *raciolinguistics* (Flores & Rosa, 2015) and introduced the *raciolinguistic perspective* "which theorizes the historical and contemporary co-naturalization of language and race" (Rosa & Flores, 2017). They argue that the "structural logics of racial capitalism perpetually marginalizes particular populations" and that "we must not interpret the class ascendance of particular racialized persons as a product of their accumulation of cultural and linguistic capital, but rather as a legitimating articulation of white supremacy" (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 639).

Recent applications of the raciolinguistic perspective in labor migration contexts focuses on the various forms of linguistic assimilation in the Global North. Ramjattan (2018), in his earlier work on accentism, discussed the ways in which 'sounding right' reinforces White privilege when Indian migrant workers 'whiten' their voice when learning and using the English language as they are taught that it signifies 'nativeness' and 'clarity' and makes them an 'aesthestic laborer.' Ramjattan (2022) further explained in a more recent work that migrant laborers in English-speaking Global North countries modify their accents for their "linguistic deficiencies" to be accepted as institutional racism, including in language practices and ideologies, hinder their employment opportunities. The same situation is happening among international students in Canadian universities looking for jobs as they identified that 'sounding Canadian' is connected to aural employability or the ability to be heard as employable (Ramjattan, 2023).

In Rome, migrants and youth refugees are labelled as disabled in schools and foster care homes for practicing their non-European linguistic repertoire. This shows how the Italian authorities devalue the home language of non-European migrants, which forces them to shift to the use of monolingual Italian to perform the image of the 'good (im)migrant' who assimilates in Italian society (Migliarini & Cioè-Peña, 2022). In Australia, two forms of translingual discrimination is happening among skilled migrant workers – namely, name discrimination and English discrimination (Dovchin & Dryden, 2022). Translingual name discrimination is a form of 'name policing' wherein job applicants are rejected due to having a 'foreign birth name.' This forces them to apply 'CV whitening' by 'whitening one's name' to increase the chances of landing employment. Translingual English discrimination, meanwhile, is a common form of discrimination among migrants based on their English language proficiency.

Pak and Hiramoto (2023) considers the presence of raciolinguistic phenomenon beyond the Western epistemologies as *sticky*, taking in the notion of 'stickiness' by Sara Ahmed (2004) as applied in Singapore. They defined *sticky raciolinguistics* as "the refusal and inability to abandon the colonial logics that cemented the conaturalization of race and language as the only way to make sense of racial and linguistic categories" (p. 62). Pak and Hiramoto claims that the racialized power of the White British colonizers of Singapore continued in the dominance of the Chinese in Singaporean society through *Chinese privilege*. They said that while harmony is at the center of racial hermeneutics in Singapore, Chinese privilege in the country reproduced the processes of racialization and racial cateogorization through censures and confessionals. Through a semiotic analysis of Tweets by Singaporeans and the application of the raciolinguistic perspective, they found that netizens utilized Chinese privilege to call out behaviors or practices of Singaporeans that may seem as racist, discriminatory, or exclusionary, such as the use of Mandarin by office workers in Singaporean workplaces. The sarcastic note from the Tweet featured in Pak and Hiromoto's study was most likely done by a non-Chinese individual.

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Figure 1. Tweet censuring the use of Mandarin in the workplace (July 25, 2016)



Figure 4. Tweet confessing Chinese privilege (June 26, 2020)

(Pak & Hiramoto, 2023, pp. 53-58)

On the other hand, Chinese privilege as a confessional shows an admission of privilege that exists in Singaporean society. Pak and Hiramoto explained that in this case (pp. 58), the racialization of the self is a prerequisite to privilege as a confessional. They saw a similarity on Ahmed's investigations on the institutional admission of racism where speakers are seen doing it in the service of antiracism. However, for Pak and Hiramoto, the antiracist posturing in the confessional exercises are a semiotic gesture.

Docot (2025) expanded raciolinguistic discourses by advancing the lens of 'disposability' of migrant workers through the context of Filipino English teachers in China. She argued that, "raciolinguistic disposability is the result of the global spread and emplacement of raciolinguistic hegemonies which utilise surplussed populations from the Global South in jobs that ultimately service the formation and maintenance of a raciolinguistic hierarchy" (2025, pp. 325). Furthermore, Docot further explained that the situation of disposability that Global South migrants are put into due to existing systemic hierarchies accord them as having lesser value by their employers despite having similar skills and experiences as Euro-American or Global North counterparts.

3.1.3 English as linguistic capital

As established in the previous section, migrants living, working, and studying in the Anglophone world are required to linguistically assimilate in their host countries by having a certain proficiency in the English language. Despite being knowledgeable in English, they go towards the lengths of accent modification and "whitening" their names to increase their possibilities of gaining employment. This linguistic injustice is what Tupas (2015) refers to as *unequal Englishes* and defined as the unequal valuation of the different variations of the English, which then impact the lives and identities of its speakers. Despite the linguistic inequalities in high-income countries, the systemic economic oppression in the Global South forces its people to migrate to be able to afford their basic necessities.

In Asian countries, there is a top-down implementation of English as medium of instruction (EMI) in academic institutions as it is linked to internationalization and the view that learning the language can be a ticket to better opportunities and employment overseas. For Nepalis, parents, students, and teachers viewed EMI as a way to gain linguistic capital, which then increases their chances of upward socioeconomic mobility (Sah & Li, 2018). Filipinos looks at the English language the same way from a socioeconomic standpoint (Dreisbach & Demeterio, 2020). It is important to emphasize that both Nepal and the Philippines are known to train their population to become

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overseas workers, primarily in the Middle East. For the Philippine context, aside from being a migrant worker-sending country, English is deeply embedded in its educational system due to American colonization. Filipinos are in demand globally for their fluency in the English language. Even within their own country, Filipinos working in call centers catering to Anglophone markets are undergoing a process of accent modification (Tupas, 2019). With a relatively high English language proficiency and the ability to modify accents through training, the Philippines is now a top destination for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students eager to learn English in an affordable setting.

Lorente (2009), in her mapping of the English language as a linguistic capital, necessitates multiple levels of analysis to take into consideration the complexities in the structuring processes of inequality. In her study on the Filipino domestic workers in Singapore, she considers English as both a site of resource and symbolic struggle. In 1998, the Philippine government 'imposed' a minimum wage for transnational domestic workers and supported it with an image that Filipinos are globally-competitive, English-speaking, and flexible workers. Since English-speaking skills are highly valued in Singapore, it was acceptable for Singaporean employers to give higher salaries to Filipino domestic workers. On the other hand, it exposed the symbolic struggle of other domestic workers experiencing the reproduction of disempowering stereotypes, particularly on Indonesians and the Burmese.

Following the diverse experiences of migrant workers using the English language, Codó and Riera-Gil (2022) reasoned that the value of English as linguistic capital is context-dependent. There are language-centered factors (linguistic awareness and adaptive skills) and non-language centered factors (market and social indexicalities) that determine the value of the variations of the English language and its speakers.

3.1.4 The Filipino migrant worker in the UAE from a raciolinguistic perspective

In the context of the UAE, despite being in the lower end of the population's social strata, Filipino migrants are racially categorized higher than other Asian nationalities and Africans due to their English-speaking skills and high educational attainment (having an undergraduate degree). They dominate in domestic work, retail, construction, engineering, and other administrative and human resource-related activities, obtaining higher positions in compared to other nationalities (Malit & Oliver, 2020). Just like the Filipino domestic workers in Singapore who can negotiate higher salaries, it is established in existing academic literature of labor migration that Filipinos in the UAE also receive relatively higher salaries compared to their Asian and African counterparts (Ngeh & Pelican, 2018; Parreñas et al., 2018; Malit & Oliver 2020). A Cameroonian labor migrant respondent in the study of Oliver and Malit (2020) mentioned, "Cameroonians end up reinvesting again to get more certificates that are recognized in the UAE. Employers pay you AED 1,200 (USD 125) while they pay Filipinos AED 3,700 (USD 1,000) for the same position. This is discrimination." Even Filipino domestic workers in Dubai are paid USD 1,000 as well, ten times higher than what they would earn in the Philippines and is tax-free as there is no personal income tax in the federation (Parreñas, et al., 2018).

Joana (pseudonym), a Filipina who works as a human resource manager in the UAE hospitality industry, values proficiency in the English language highly being in the service sector. During my ethnographic fieldwork in federation, I noticed a recent influx of newly-hired African employees in hotels and taxis in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. I asked Joana about this and asked how this affects the situation of Filipino workers in hospitality. She said, "As Filipino came long before the Africans, we are now management positions. The English of the new African employees are good enough to accommodate our guests. Of course, we are still better (in speaking English) than them. (Laughs). Maybe that's why we are the bosses."

During the second year of my fieldwork, I worked as a volunteer teacher at a Filipino private school in Sharjah. It was there where I found out that there are Filipinos working at middle management positions in UAE companies as they were the parents of many of the students. An observation I noticed in the linguistic repertoire of Filipino workers was their ability to code-switch in a combination of English and Arabic, a phenomenon referred to in language contact literature as Gulf English (Siemund, Al-Issa, & Leimbgrubber, 2020) or UAE English (Boyle, 2011; Hopkyns, Zoghbor, & Hassall, 2020; Lorenz, 2022). The emergence of this contact language is the accommodation of the prestige languages (Arabic and English) by the superdiverse population of the country. From a raciolinguistic perspspective, the linguistic capital enables Filipinos to communicate and negotiate their identities as Asian migrant workers in a highly racialized labor market. Moreover, consistent with

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the findings of Lorente (2009) in the previous section, the linguistic and racial capital of Filipinos as English speakers revealed a symbolic struggle among the migrant workers belong to the lower social strata in the federation. This, however, enabled the racial stereotypes that Indians and Bangladeshis work in the technical aspects of industries. It also shows the role of Filipino workers in reinforcing the hierarchical differences establish through linguistic practices.

Michelle (pseudonym), a Filipino director of nurses at a hospital in Sharjah, had two children in the school where I did my volunteer teaching. In my interview with her regarding their family's language policies, she emphasized the importance of the use of English in their household as her children were already born in the UAE. "English is the language of the majority here and it is expected that my children will also work here *kasi dito na sila pinanganak. Kaya, hindi na maiiwasan na English ang salitain ng mga anak ko. Important talaga ang English dahil diyan tayo kilala bilang mga Pilipino at magkakatrabaho ang mga anak ko dahil fluent sila sa English,*" she said. (English is the language of the majority here (UAE) and it is expected that my children will also work because they were born here. Therefore, it is unavoidable that my children can only speak English. English is really important because Filipinos are known because of it, and my children can get a job as they are fluent English speakers.)

It is important to emphasize that neoliberalism exists in the processes of labor migration. The imaging of a Filipino migrant worker as a *globally-competitive, English-speaking, and flexible worker* is a commodification of personhood with an exchange value in the global market (Allan & McElhinny, 2017). Filipinos may earn relatively more than other Asian and African counterparts, but it will never be as high as their Global North counterparts. The personal anecdote I mentioned in the second section accentuates this. One's position in the socioeconomic strata in the UAE dictates their salary. Filipinos in the UAE may now be in middle management positions, but it is possible that their salaries are only a quarter of what Westerners or local Emiratis earn. English as a global lingua franca is bound with neoliberalism and maintains historical colonial inequalities (Hsu, 2015).

4. Conclusion

The racialization of labor in the United Arab Emirates can be critically examined through the framework of raciolinguistics, which explores how language and race intersect to hierarchies. In the UAE, migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and other regions are disproportionately confined to low-status, labor-intensive jobs, a stratification reinforced not only through racial categories but also through linguistic distinctions. Arabic, the UAE's official language, carries high symbolic and economic value, conferring social prestige and access to better employment opportunities. In contrast, non-Arabic-speaking migrants, whose languages include Hindi, Tamil, Urdu, Filipino, and Bengali, are typically relegated to subordinate roles within the labor market. This linguistic hierarchy is compounded by racialized assumptions that Global South migrant workers are "less skilled" or "less capable," based on both their race and the languages they speak. However, overseas Filipino workers, who are fluent in English, occupy a distinct position in this system. English proficiency grants them a form of linguistic capital, positioning them in higher-status roles, particularly in sectors like customer service, healthcare, and business, where English is a key asset. This differential access to opportunities further illustrates how language serves as a mechanism for structuring labor hierarchies, reflecting broader patterns of racial and linguistic exploitation. Ultimately, the UAE's labor market illustrates the role of language in reinforcing both racial and socio-economic inequalities, where linguistic capital becomes a means of governing migrant bodies and maintaining systemic stratification.

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