Translanguaging, Humor, and Identity in the Linguistic Landscape of a Philippine Fast-Food Chain

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Abstract

This study explores how translanguaging, humor, and identity are constructed through signage of the Philippine fast-food chain Greenwich in Ilocos Norte. Fifty signage texts collected between March and June 2025 from two branches in shopping centers (Robinsons Ilocos in San Nicolas and SM City Laoag in Laoag City) were analyzed using qualitative linguistic landscape and discourse analysis. Five translanguaging patterns emerged: lexical integration, syntactic blending, pick-up-line constructions, metaphorical fusion, and multimodal pairing. Taglish strategically delivers humorous and affective messages that resonate with Filipino youth culture. Drawing on translanguaging as a unified communicative repertoire, this study shows that bilingual signage indexes emotional tone, familiarity, and social belonging rather than serving a purely ornamental role. The humor includes puns, pop culture references, and affective exaggerations, contributing to a playful yet culturally grounded performance of identity. While the signage reflects a national urban youth identity, the absence of Ilokano in a predominantly Ilokano-speaking province raises questions of linguistic inclusivity. Commercial texts thus operate as translanguaging spaces that shape consumer-brand rapport and reflect broader social norms while selectively prioritizing national over provincial identities for market alignment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is home to one of Southeast Asia's most complex linguistic landscapes, with more than 180 languages spoken across its islands (Thompson, 2003). This diversity has been shaped by Spanish colonization, American occupation, and globalization, resulting in hybrid modes of communication that are now part of everyday life (Bautista, 2004; De Costa & Hismanoglu, 2020).

A key expression of this hybridity is the widespread use of Taglish, a blend of Tagalog and English. Taglish is not a sign of linguistic deficiency but a creative and deliberate form of communication, particularly common among urban youth and middle-class speakers (Thompson, 2003; Clemente, 2022). Speakers use it not only for lexical substitution but also to shape tone, express humor, and convey emotional nuance (Aguilar, 2017).

Traditional concepts such as code-switching and code-mixing frame language alternation as either structural or socially strategic (Bullock & Toribio, 2009; Gumperz, 1982). More recent scholarship, however, introduces translanguaging as a more fluid and integrated practice. Originally developed in Welsh classrooms (Williams, 1994) and later elaborated by García and Li Wei (2014), translanguaging refers to the dynamic use of an entire linguistic repertoire in

context-sensitive ways. Canagarajah (2011) describes it as a form of creative negotiation shaped by audience, space, and social positioning.

This framework is especially relevant in the Philippine setting, where bilingual speakers seamlessly blend Filipino and English in face-to-face, digital, and media interactions (Fabellon, 2023; González, 2019). Such language use is not random but shaped by affect, identity, and interactional goals. Among Filipino youth, translanguaging signals group affiliation, emotional intelligence, and a sense of cultural attunement (Clemente, 2022; Aguilar, 2017).

Humor provides a particularly rich site for translanguaging. Hugot lines, short Taglish expressions often centered on love or heartbreak, exemplify how emotional meaning is intensified through bilingual play (Masagnay, 2020). Galán (2018) emphasizes that such humor relies on cultural fluency and shared knowledge, making it both intimate and communal.

While these forms are often studied in interpersonal or digital settings, translanguaging also plays a growing role in public and commercial communication. In Philippine advertising, branding, and signage, Taglish is commonly used to deliver messages that are humorous, emotionally engaging, and culturally familiar. Reyes and Mendoza (2020) find that younger audiences respond more positively to ads written in hybrid language, while Del Mundo et al. (2018) note that public health campaigns also benefit from similar strategies.

This aligns with international research. Mamidi (2018) shows that bilingual wordplay in Indian advertising captures attention and builds emotional connection. Carrasco (2019) reports that in Hispanic markets, blending languages helps brands foster a sense of belonging and cultural closeness.

In the Philippine context, these dynamics are visible in store signage, menus, promotional posters, and social media graphics. Such materials often feature Taglish humor, pop culture references, and emotionally resonant phrases. These are not merely decorative but function as translanguaging spaces that invite shared interpretation and cultural alignment (García & Li Wei, 2014). They help construct a sense of rapport between brands and consumers and reinforce social norms of inclusion and identity.

Despite the visibility of these practices, scholarship on translanguaging in Philippine public signage remains limited. Much attention has been given to educational contexts (Martin, 2017), media discourse (González, 2019; Clemente, 2022), and interpersonal communication (Aguilar, 2017). However, everyday commercial texts remain underexamined. These are the most accessible and visible forms of hybrid language use, where humor, identity, and affective connection are enacted in real time. Investigating these texts can deepen our understanding of how translanguaging shapes cultural participation in public life.

1.1. Research Question

This study examined how translanguaging, humor, and identity were constructed and communicated through the signage of a Philippine fast-food chain. **Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:**

1. What translanguaging patterns were evident in the linguistic features of the signage used in a Philippine fast-food chain?
2. What types of humor were employed through these translanguaging practices?
3. How did the signage construct or reflect Filipino identity?

2. METHODOLOGY
2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design anchored in the principles of linguistic landscape analysis and discourse analysis. It aimed to examine how everyday public signage, as found in fast-food spaces, functions as a communicative site where language practices, humor, and cultural identity converge. The design was exploratory and interpretive, focusing on how language operates in context and how multilingual signage participates in sociolinguistic meaning-making. Although the study was primarily qualitative, it also incorporated light quantitative coding to identify recurring patterns of translanguaging and humor across the data set.

2.2. Sources of Data

The data consisted of fifty signage items collected between March and June 2025 from two Greenwich branches located in major shopping centres in Ilocos Norte: the Robinsons Ilocos branch in San Nicolas and the SM City Laoag branch in Laoag City. All publicly displayed in-store, customer-facing materials were included, such as menu boards, wall posters, promotional displays, table cards and tray liners, and any signage intended for private or customer-specific communication was excluded. Branches were chosen for their placement in the province's two largest malls to ensure a representative sample of high-traffic retail environments. Data collection was carried out via non-intrusive photography during multiple field visits, with ethical safeguards observed by recording only items visible in public commercial spaces.

These signs were treated as linguistic artifacts situated in a commercial but culturally meaningful context. Their visibility and accessibility made them ideal for examining everyday language use in urban Filipino life. Since the locations were all in Ilocos Norte, a multilingual and predominantly Ilokano-speaking region, the signage reflected not only national marketing strategies but also local interpretations of communication.

2.3. Data Analysis Plan and Framework

The analysis followed a multi-layered process combining qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis, guided by the concept of translanguaging as theorized in García and Li Wei (2014). The first stage involved identifying translanguaging features within the signage. These included lexical blending, syntactic mixing, and hybrid expressions that combined English and Tagalog into a single communicative act. The analysis did not treat English and Tagalog as separate systems, but rather as integrated elements of a shared communicative repertoire. This approach aligned with the translanguaging framework that views multilingual speakers as drawing fluidly from their full linguistic resources depending on context and purpose (Canagarajah, 2011; García & Li Wei, 2014).

The second layer of analysis focused on humor. Drawing from studies on bilingual and multimodal humor (Galán, 2018; Mamidi, 2018; Masagnay, 2020), the signs were coded for humor types including puns, intertextual references, pickup-line formats, and culturally specific jokes. The purpose was to understand how humor interacts with language mixing to create affective engagement and audience connection. Humor was not examined as a separate category, but as one that functioned closely with translanguaging practices to generate layered meanings and emotional resonance.

The final analytical layer examined how the signage reflected or constructed Filipino identity. The signs were analyzed for cultural references, emotional tone, and linguistic style that indexed shared values or social belonging. Attention was given to how relationality, wit, intimacy, and linguistic play shaped the messages' appeal and effectiveness, particularly in engaging a Filipino audience. This part of the analysis was informed by discourse studies emphasizing language's role in identity performance and social alignment (Reyes & Mendoza, 2020; Galán, 2018; Canagarajah, 2011).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Translanguaging Patterns in Signage

The analysis of fifty signage items collected from four Greenwich branches in Ilocos Norte revealed five major translanguaging patterns: lexical integration, syntactic blending, formulaic pickup-line constructions, metaphorical fusion, and multimodal pairing. These patterns appeared consistently across the data and demonstrated how language use in commercial signage engages the Filipino multilingual repertoire to convey humor, familiarity, and emotional resonance. Notably, there was no instance of Ilokano in any of the signage, despite the research being conducted in a predominantly Ilokano-speaking region. This choice reflects a preference for a more nationally recognizable Tagalog-English hybrid over regional linguistic forms, likely to reach broader audiences and align with dominant urban linguistic practices.

Lexical integration appeared in forty-four of the fifty signs, or 88 percent of the dataset. This involved embedding English content words such as "crust," "melt," "cheese," and "layer" into Tagalog grammatical structures. An example of this pattern is the line "Pizza ka ba? Kasi crust kita eh," where the English word "crust" is used playfully within a Tagalog sentence. This pattern echoes earlier observations by Bautista (2004), who described English lexical insertions as common features of conversational Taglish. She noted that these English terms often bring a tone of modernity or precision and are selected for their pragmatic value. In these commercial signs, such word choices serve not only lexical functions but also aesthetic and emotional ones. García and Li Wei (2014) argue that translanguaging draws from an integrated communicative repertoire rather than switching between separate systems. These signs exemplify this principle by demonstrating how English terms are embedded meaningfully within Tagalog syntax, forming a cohesive message rather than a patchwork of languages.

Syntactic blending was evident in 72 percent of the data, with thirty-six signs combining Tagalog and English grammatical structures into unified expressions. One example is "Lasagna ka ba? I love every layer of you," where the pickup line begins in Tagalog and transitions into English for the punchline. Canagarajah (2011) describes this blending as codemeshing, where

multilingual speakers creatively integrate elements from multiple linguistic systems to achieve rhetorical goals. In this context, the humor and emotional weight of the message depend on the audience's ability to navigate the grammatical blend. This reflects an expectation of shared multilingual competence between brand and consumer, reinforcing a sense of cultural and linguistic proximity. Fabellon (2023) also observed similar syntactic patterns in online discourse, where speakers blend grammar to suit both affective tone and contextual purpose. The signage, then, operates within the same translanguaging logic as digital and interpersonal communication.

One of the most culturally grounded patterns identified was the use of formulaic pickup-line constructions, found in 46 percent of signs. The format "X ka ba? Kasi..." is highly recognizable in Philippine pop culture and is often associated with humorous or emotionally charged expressions, known colloquially as "hugot lines." A typical example from the data is "Cheese ka ba? Kasi I melt when I see you." These constructions rely on shared cultural scripts and humorous expectations. According to Masagnay (2020), hugot lines leverage bilingualism for emotional resonance and humor. Their wide appeal stems from their accessibility and their grounding in everyday speech. Reyes and Mendoza (2020) found that Filipino youth connect more strongly with brands that speak their language not only literally but culturally. These signs align with that finding, using translanguaging to deliver culturally embedded affective messages. This pattern demonstrates that translanguaging is not only a communicative strategy but also a stylistic and performative one.

Closely related to this formulaic structure is the pattern of metaphorical fusion, present in 62 percent of signs. These metaphors used food-related terms to evoke emotions and relationships, often in bilingual formats. For instance, "My heart beats pasta when I'm with you" combines a visual metaphor with linguistic play. The humor and impact of such expressions rely on the reader's ability to interpret metaphor through a bilingual lens. Galán (2018) explains that bilingual metaphors in advertising function effectively when they resonate with shared cultural experiences. Translanguaging here supports metaphorical creativity, allowing different layers of meaning to coexist within the same message. The blending of food and emotion in hybrid language structures aligns with García and Li Wei's (2014) idea of translanguaging spaces, where emotional, cultural, and semiotic resources interact dynamically. These metaphors operate on multiple registers, producing humor, warmth, and identification simultaneously.

Lastly, all fifty signs exhibited multimodal pairing, where linguistic content was reinforced by visuals such as hearts, melting cheese, or layered pasta. These images did not serve as background decoration but were integral to the sign's communicative function. For example, a sign about lasagna included a graphic showing distinct layers, emphasizing the metaphor of emotional depth. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), meaning is made through the interplay of modes—text, image, and layout. In the Greenwich signs, this interaction strengthened the impact of the translanguaging message. Mamidi (2018), in her analysis of Indian billboard advertisements, similarly found that visual accompaniment enhances the interpretability of bilingual puns and metaphors. In this case, the multimodal strategies work alongside translanguaging to engage the reader more fully, inviting not just understanding but emotional participation.

Across all five patterns, the absence of Ilokano in a highly Ilokano-speaking region is a striking omission. While one might expect local languages to be featured in regionally located signage, the decision to use only Tagalog and English suggests a deliberate orientation toward a national linguistic identity. Thompson (2003) observes that Tagalog-English hybrids are often chosen in public discourse to evoke a cosmopolitan, inclusive identity that transcends regional boundaries. The signage appears to echo this approach, using translanguaging to construct messages that feel intimate and familiar to a wide audience, even at the cost of excluding local linguistic diversity.

These results demonstrate how translanguaging in fast-food signage is not incidental. It reflects broader communicative norms in Philippine society and aligns closely with theoretical insights about language use in multilingual settings. Translanguaging in this context serves not only informational or advertising functions but also emotional, cultural, and identity-driven purposes. By combining lexical choices, syntactic structures, humor formats, metaphors, and visuals, these signs create rich communicative moments that depend on the audience's linguistic flexibility and cultural competence.

3.2. Humor Types in Translanguaging Signage

The humorous appeal of Greenwich signage was a consistent feature across the dataset, with 76 percent of the signs exhibiting clear comedic intent. Humor in this context was not merely decorative but functioned as a communicative strategy shaped through translanguaging. Analysis of the signage revealed four dominant types of humor: wordplay and puns, cultural references, absurd or hyperbolic scenarios, and romantic or emotional irony. These humor types relied on the dynamic interaction between English and Tagalog, capitalizing on bilingual creativity and cultural familiarity to produce meaning and affect.

Wordplay and puns were the most frequent humor strategy, present in 64 percent of the signage. These signs often relied on homophones or phonetic closeness between English and Tagalog words to create clever associations. For example, "Cheese ka ba? Kasi I melt when I see you" uses the English term "melt" not only for its culinary association but also as a metaphor for emotional response. This blending of literal and figurative meaning requires the reader to parse dual layers of interpretation, a hallmark of bilingual punning.

According to Masagnay (2020), Filipino humor often rests on linguistic dexterity, with code-switching enhancing comedic impact. His analysis of "hugot" lines in Philippine cinema found that bilingual punchlines increase humor when audiences can decode both semantic content and cultural references. Similarly, Canagarajah (2011) emphasizes that translanguaging involves not only code-mixing but rhetorical design, allowing speakers (and in this case, signage designers) to draw from a full communicative repertoire. The success of these puns depends on the audience's bilingual competence and cultural intuition.

Cultural references, particularly to music and memes, appeared in 32 percent of the signs. One notable example was "Pizza will never give you up, let you down, run around & desert you," a clear reference to Rick Astley's song that became a global internet meme. Another was "I'll stop the world and melt with you," echoing the 1980s hit by Modern English. These signs relied on the reader's familiarity with global pop culture while embedding it in the local food context.

Galán (2018) notes that bilingual humor can function as a form of cultural indexing, where shared knowledge creates social proximity between message and audience. In this signage, humor was not limited to linguistic wit but included intertextual signals that invited readers to recognize and enjoy the cultural allusion. Translanguaging here operated not only across linguistic systems but also across cultural domains, facilitating recognition and affiliation.

Absurd or hyperbolic humor was evident in 20 percent of the signs. These relied on exaggerated emotional metaphors expressed through food language, such as "My heart beats pasta when I'm with you" or "Lasagna ka ba? I love every layer of your personality." These signs employed playful exaggeration, treating emotional experience as something that could be represented through layered dishes, melting cheese, or crusty textures.

This type of humor aligns with what Reyes and Mendoza (2020) describe as affective stylization, wherein brands adopt exaggerated emotional tones that mimic the dramatic language of Filipino romantic and comedic discourse. Such stylization is made more effective through translanguaging, which allows for strategic emphasis, repetition, or affective layering. García and Li Wei (2014) argue that translanguaging is particularly useful in contexts where emotion must be expressed vividly and creatively, as it allows users to mix lexical and grammatical resources that best suit the communicative goal.

Romantic or emotional irony appeared in 28 percent of the signage. These signs played on flirtatious or exaggerated emotional statements while maintaining a humorous undertone. For instance, "Crust kita eh" plays on the Tagalog phrase "crush kita," with "crust" serving as a visual and lexical pun. The line is simultaneously sincere and ironic, inviting the reader to laugh at the over-the-top emotional claim while also enjoying its playful construction.

This layered humor reflects Pennycook's (2007) concept of linguistic performance, where speakers (or text creators) engage in affective play, using language to position themselves within emotional and cultural discourses. The signs performed a kind of mock-romantic discourse that is widely understood and appreciated in Filipino youth culture. Translanguaging allowed these expressions to move between irony and sincerity, English and Tagalog, private emotion and public performance.

Across all types, humor in the signage functioned as a translanguaging act, engaging both linguistic and cultural competencies. The signage was not merely funny in a universal sense but humorous because of its rootedness in Filipino bilingualism. The audience was expected to decode meaning through context, emotion, shared knowledge, and bilingual dexterity. In line with Mamidi (2018), who found that bilingual humor in Indian advertising heightened consumer engagement, these signs demonstrate that translanguaging enhances not only intelligibility but also emotional resonance.

Furthermore, the use of humor through translanguaging performed identity work. It positioned both the brand and its consumers as modern, witty, emotionally expressive, and culturally attuned. Canagarajah (2011) emphasizes that codemeshing enables identity performance, allowing speakers to display affiliation with particular communities. Here, the signage offered a shared humorous space where cultural belonging and linguistic fluidity were enacted publicly.

Despite the rich display of Tagalog-English humor, it is again worth noting that Ilokano was entirely absent from these signs, even though the data was gathered in Ilocos Norte. This omission suggests a preference for national linguistic norms over regional ones, prioritizing

widespread appeal and linguistic familiarity over localized engagement. It also underscores the commercial logic of linguistic choice, as brands may opt for translanguaging patterns that are broadly recognizable and emotionally potent rather than linguistically inclusive.

Overall, the types of humor found in the signage were not random or ornamental. They were deeply structured through translanguaging practices that blend lexical, syntactic, emotional, and cultural resources. Humor in this context becomes a vehicle not only for entertainment but for identity expression, consumer-brand connection, and cultural affirmation.

3.3. Identity Construction through Translanguaging Signage

The signage collected from four Greenwich branches in Ilocos Norte conveyed more than product marketing. Through its translanguaging strategies, it reflected and constructed particular forms of Filipino identity. Language use in these signs was not limited to function or humor. It served as a cultural and social marker that situated the consumer within specific affective and linguistic communities. Drawing from García and Li Wei's (2014) concept of translanguaging as identity practice, the study found that the signage participated in shaping a Filipino identity that is urban, bilingual, emotionally expressive, and culturally aware.

The data revealed that the signage consistently used Taglish expressions, particularly those associated with urban youth culture. These included romantic metaphors and pickup-line formats such as "Lasagna ka ba? I love every layer of your personality" and "Crust kita eh." These phrases echoed the "hugot" style of communication, a discourse marked by emotional exaggeration and irony, popularized in Filipino films, social media, and advertising. As noted by Masagnay (2020), hugot lines are often constructed through Taglish because the emotional impact is heightened when expressions draw from two languages rather than one.

Through the use of these expressions, the signage performed a youthful, witty, and emotionally literate identity. Canagarajah (2011) argues that translanguaging allows for rhetorical stance-taking, enabling speakers and texts to position themselves within social and cultural fields. In this context, the signage positioned both the brand and its consumers as belonging to a speech community comfortable with linguistic hybridity and cultural play. Rather than appealing to formal standards of either Filipino or English, the signs mirrored the informal, emotive, and strategic ways people communicate in daily life.

Another important identity feature was relational familiarity. The signs assumed shared knowledge with their readers. For instance, the line "Cheese ka ba? Kasi I melt when I see you" only works if the reader understands the pun, the cultural convention of the pickup line, and the emotional tone it intends to evoke. This shared cultural literacy between text and reader performs what Pennycook (2007) refers to as identity through affective stylization. Language in this context is not merely descriptive. It is a vehicle through which shared emotional and social identities are constructed and affirmed.

In addition, the signage used humor and warmth to create a sense of belonging. This was reinforced through multimodal elements—cartoon imagery, bright colors, and smiling food illustrations—that complemented the linguistic message. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe this as semiotic layering, where text and image work together to reinforce meaning. In this case, the playful visuals worked in tandem with Taglish phrases to construct a brand identity that is approachable, fun-loving, and culturally resonant. This aesthetic strategy contributed to a sense of Filipino identity that values humor, emotional intimacy, and friendliness.

While identity was broadly constructed as national and youthful, there was also a notable absence. The signage did not feature Ilokano or other regional languages, despite being placed in a predominantly Ilokano-speaking province. Thompson (2003) has observed that Taglish functions as the default urban speech register in many public texts, often sidelining regional or indigenous languages. This omission suggests that commercial identity construction, while inclusive in some aspects, remains selective. It prioritizes linguistic forms that maximize market reach and cultural recognizability, even at the cost of local representation.

This strategy reflects what Reyes and Mendoza (2020) describe as "linguistic branding," where the use of Taglish in marketing constructs a consumer identity aligned with aspirational values such as modernity, bilingual fluency, and emotional intelligence. Although this identity resonates with many Filipinos, especially in urban and middle-class sectors, it may exclude those who do not share these linguistic repertoires. As such, translanguaging in signage not only reflects identity but also enacts social boundaries.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce García and Li Wei's (2014) argument that translanguaging is more than a language practice. It is a space where social identity, emotional expression, and cultural positioning are actively negotiated. The Greenwich signage texts created such spaces by inviting consumers to read, laugh, and feel within a shared linguistic framework. The playful interplay between Tagalog and English, visual elements, and emotional tropes constructed a version of Filipino identity that is dynamic, multilingual, and affectively engaged.

In summary, the signage studied in this research constructed Filipino identity through patterns of translanguaging that were emotionally expressive, culturally coded, and linguistically hybrid. While it reflected common speech practices of Filipino youth, it also demonstrated the selective nature of identity performance in commercial settings. The absence of Ilokano in a region where it is widely spoken underscores the broader tensions between national branding and linguistic diversity.

4. CONCLUSION

This study showed that translanguaging in commercial signage serves as an intentional communicative strategy that reflects how bilingual Filipinos use language in daily life. The signs combined Tagalog and English not only to convey messages but also to create emotional resonance, humor, and familiarity. Through this fusion of languages and visual elements, the signage presented communicative experiences that depended on the audience's linguistic and cultural fluency. This confirms that translanguaging in public texts is a dynamic and strategic tool for engagement rather than a casual or incidental feature.

The patterns found in this signage support the theoretical claims of scholars such as García and Li Wei, who argue that speakers draw from a unified communicative repertoire, and Canagarajah, who describes codemeshing as a rhetorical act. Humor was used not simply for entertainment but as a marker of shared knowledge, cultural alignment, and identity expression. Signs that referenced pop culture, emotional irony, and pickup-line formulas were effective because they tapped into widely understood communicative norms, especially among urban and younger Filipino audiences.

Still, the omission of Ilokano in a province where it is widely spoken reveals a limitation in the signage's inclusivity. While the use of Taglish projects a national and modern identity, it may also marginalize local linguistic communities. This raises important concerns about how

commercial texts can balance wide appeal with regional representation. Future research can build on this work by exploring how translanguaging practices could more equitably reflect the linguistic diversity of the Philippines.

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