

Tagalog the Borrower

Filipino is the official language of the Philippines, although English is the lingua franca for business and education. Filipino is derived from Tagalog, the language of the people in the Manila area and the surrounding provinces such as Batangas, Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna and Quezon. Venture outside these provinces and you will be dealing with another language or dialect, of which there are scores in the Philippines. Some scholars have stated that there are 170 languages and dialects, an astonishing number for a country two thirds the size of California. There are eight major languages, with Tagalog spoken by 50 million or roughly half the population. National officials called the language Filipino so as not to offend the people who spoke the other major languages such as Cebuano (next most popular with 20 million speakers), Ilocano, Pampango, Bicol, Waray, etc. But the practical reality is that no one would ask if you speak Filipino, it is always do you speak Tagalog. The language borrows heavily, resulting in what the linguists call loanwords. Most of the borrowed words come from Spain, and it is almost impossible to speak Tagalog without saying something in Spanish. For example, except for Sunday (*Linggo* vs. Domingo), the days of the week are in Spanish. So are the months of the year. There are no Tagalog equivalents. Estimates vary, but the percentage of loanwords range from around 20 to as much as 33 percent. But as we will see later, that is quite low compared to other languages. It is not just Spanish, we have borrowed from Chinese, Indian (Hindi) and Nahuatl (indigenous Mexican). But if you find words in Bahasa Malay or Bahasa Indonesian that are equal or similar to Tagalog, they are not loanwords, since these languages are part of the Austronesian group. With the electronic age, our borrowing has shifted. There are now more English loanwords than ever. In fact, most day-to-day conversations, even TV newscasts, are in *Taglish*, a mixture of Tagalog and English. Listen to any of the country's leaders, including the president, deliver a speech. They cannot go more than a few minutes before mixing up English and Tagalog.

There are a handful of Tagalog words which have made it into the American lexicon. The most popular one is boondocks or boonies, meaning isolated, out of the way, etc. It is derived from *bundok*, Tagalog for mountain. The story goes that during the Filipino-American war (1899-1902), American soldiers returning to their camps would say they came from the *bundoks*. The soldiers took the word home and it's been in the language ever since. Have your children or grandchildren ever come home from school saying there is an outbreak of cooties? Cooties comes from *kuto*, Tagalog (also Malayan) for lice. (Cootie has another meaning among children, but we'll stick to lice for now.) Yoyo was originally a toy popularized by a Filipino immigrant named Pedro Flores. He trademarked the word and started manufacturing the toy in California nearly 100 years ago. Not only is yoyo a toy, but it is sometimes used as an analogy, such as "the stock market is like a yoyo." A few references define yoyo as "come, come" in Tagalog, but yoyo does not really mean anything in Tagalog. It turns out that Flores was an Ilocano speaker, from the province of Ilocos. So, yoyo is Ilocano. Some words are quite obscure, like *panguingue*, or pan, a card game similar to rummy, that was once popular in Las Vegas. It was brought over by Filipino immigrants who worked in the California farms and canneries. With the advent of online gambling, devotees can keep playing pan today. As the Filipino-American population grows, 4 million at last count, and increasing popularity of Filipino restaurants, more Tagalog words may join the mainstream. I'm thinking of *adobo*, *lechon*, *leche flan*, *lumpia* and *pancit*. But wait, the first three are Spanish, the others are Chinese.

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The name of the capital city, Manila, has become a description for some items. If you ever travel to Seville in Spain and watch a flamenco dance show, the women wear a large square shawl they call Manton de Manila. I have never seen a Manton de Manila in a Philippine store, and they haven't been made in the Philippines for a very long time. During the galleon trade (1565 - 1810), the Manton was made of Chinese silk in Canton (now Guangzhou), and exported to Spain via Manila. There can never be a flamenco dance without a Manton de Manila, but unless the Spanish take up silk production and weaving, Manton de Manila is going to be made in China. At least we kept the name.

Then there's the Manila folder, Manila envelope and Manila rope. Before the widespread use of polymers, the most durable rope was made from the *abaca* plant, more popularly called Manila hemp. Ship's rigging and mooring ropes were made from abaca. It is no longer as widely used as before, but Manila rope can still be found. Get it from Amazon! Manila folders and envelopes once contained hemp, which gave them greater strength and a distinct tan color. Folders were the first product, followed by the envelope. As in any manufacturing, cost reduction took over and the hemp was replaced. But certain folders and envelopes are still described as Manila.

The greatest borrower of words is..... English! Dictionary.com estimates that 80 percent of words in the English dictionary are borrowed. 60 percent, or three fourths of them, have Latin or Greek roots. In science and technology, the figure rises to 90 percent. You're homo sapiens, aren't you? English continues to borrow, and each year more words are added. What's the 2020 word of the year? You guessed it – covid, or Covid-19, followed by doomscrolling, oysgezooamt (taken from Yiddish). However, English has become a net exporter of words. Other languages don't even try coin a new word; they just adapt the English word, although the spelling may be altered. Go to any part of the world, they'll understand computer, internet, mobile or cellphone, world wide web, radio, television. With 170,000 words and growing, English is the undisputed king. Sorry, Tagalog, you'll just have to keep borrowing.

"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."—Nelson Mandela

Mario E. Orosa
Fairfield, OH
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