

Multilingual Repertoire as Nexus of Transnational Journeys: The Case of a Hong Kong-Based Migrant Domestic Worker

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Abstract

Migrant domestic workers are frequently portrayed as vulnerable victims of globalization in both academic and popular media, a depiction that, while underscoring their challenges, risks presenting a one-dimensional view of their agency. This paper examines the lived experiences of Helen, a Filipina domestic worker in Hong Kong, to demonstrate how she actively employs her multilingual resources to navigate and reshape her roles throughout her transnational journey. Through linguistic ethnography based on interviews conducted in 2017 and participant observation, I explore the connections between Helen's experiences as a migrant worker and her evolving linguistic repertoire. Using the method of 'linguistic portrait interviewing' developed by Busch (2012, 2015), Helen's linguistic portrait reveals how her multilingual skills become assets for asserting agency and establishing her place across social contexts. Her metalinguistic narratives and reflections illustrate how she leverages her linguistic repertoire to enact, maintain, and negotiate multiple social and symbolic roles, highlighting both her resilience and adaptability. This analysis presents Helen's linguistic repertoire as a dynamic tool for sustaining her transnational experiences, underscoring the nuanced ways migrant domestic workers navigate structural inequalities while drawing upon personal resources to shape their own paths.

Keywords: Linguistic Repertoire, Multilingual Repertoire, Transnational Migration, Migrant Domestic Work

1. Introduction

Foreign domestic workers, totaling approximately 356,000 in Hong Kong as of 2023 (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2024), form a significant labor sector within the territory. Predominantly women on two-year live-in contracts, these workers are employed mainly for household duties, including cleaning, cooking, and caregiving. Around 56% of these workers come from the Philippines, where an American-influenced education system has contributed to the perception of Filipina domestic workers as proficient English speakers (cf. Lorente, 2018 for the case in Singapore). Employers in Hong Kong are often thought to favor hiring Filipina workers specifically for households with school-age children, anticipating that they can assist with English language education (Constable, 2007; Crebo, 2003).

While Filipina domestic workers are valued for these skills, their contributions are often overshadowed by exploitative conditions (Carvalho, 2019; Ladegaard, 2024; Sayres, 2005), restricted rights (Erni, 2016), discriminatory perceptions (Guinto, 2019; Ho, 2019; Jayawickrama, 2017), and limitations on personal agency (Ladegaard, 2024, Chapters 3-4; Shahvisi, 2018). Research highlights that foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong face significant restrictions, including the inability to secure alternative housing, shift occupations, or achieve permanent residency, which places them in a marginalized status characterized by restricted inclusion (Jayawickrama, 2017; Justice Centre Hong Kong, 2016; Ladegaard, 2017). John Nguyet Erni (2016) captures this paradox by describing these workers as “included-out” within Hong Kong’s citizenship framework.

Addressing the limited focus on individual experiences within existing studies on language, migration, and labor, this paper contributes a subject-level analysis by examining the language practices of Helen, a Filipina domestic worker in Hong Kong. Through linguistic ethnography, including interviews conducted with Helen in 2017 and participant observation of her activities, I explore how she utilizes her linguistic resources amid transnational labor migration. This approach answers recent calls for analyses that prioritize the agency of migrant workers, moving beyond management-focused perspectives to foreground personal agency and linguistic resourcefulness (Gonçalves, 2020; Holborow, 2018).

2. Framework and Methodology

This is part of a larger research project that investigates the sociolinguistic resources of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong (see also Guinto, 2021). I draw from the work of Jan Blommaert (2010) on the Sociolinguistics of Globalization, where he suggests a closer look at how people, especially migrants, harness (linguistic) resources in spaces of mobility. ‘The mobility of people also involves the mobility of linguistic and sociolinguistic resources...’ (p. 4). To do this, an investigation of what it is that people do with language and their lived experiences with language can be done, focusing on their linguistic repertoire. For Jan Blommaert and Ad Backus (2013), linguistic repertoires are ‘indexical biographies’ that reveal people’s life paths. ‘[A]nalyzing repertoires amounts to analyzing the social and cultural itineraries followed by people, how they maneuvered and navigated them, and how they placed themselves into the various social arenas they inhabited or visited in their lives’ (Blommaert & Backus, 2013, p. 28). In doing so, we may be able to put into perspective better programs for migrant welfare as advocated in the burgeoning field of migration linguistics (Borlongan, 2023).

This paper primarily employs linguistic ethnography—a topic-oriented ethnography (Hymes, 1996, pp. 4–6; Rampton et al., 2015) that relies on the deep familiarity of the researcher with the field site. Following Dell Hymes, Ben Rampton (2007, pp. 590–591) suggests that the linguistic ethnographer ideally ‘*tr[ies] to get analytic distance on what’s close-at-hand... [than] move from the outside inwards, trying to get familiar with the strange*’ (emphases original). In gathering the data, the method of ‘linguistic portrait interviewing’ (Busch, 2012, 2015) was used, which involves the participants coloring in a human body silhouette signifying different languages—their linguistic repertoire—and commenting on the associations they carry for them. The series of interviews conducted with Helen, whose segments appear below, happened in 2017 within the context of a university-based outreach program for foreign domestic workers where I worked as a volunteer.

3. ‘You don’t own your life or emotions here’: Introducing Helen

I met Helen, 31, through an organization affiliated with an educational institution in Hong Kong, which I will refer to as EmpowerDW. EmpowerDW supports domestic workers like Helen by offering free lectures on health, workers’ rights, relevant laws, self-defense, financial literacy, recreational activities, and entrepreneurial skills. Founded in 2014 by a Filipino

academic, EmpowerDW launched its first classes in 2015, held every other Sunday with support from his university. The goal was to foster a positive image for domestic workers and provide a space where they could develop their skills and potential on their day off. Helen joined EmpowerDW's third cohort, where I met her in 2017.

At that time, Helen had been working in Hong Kong for eight years and was employed by her third, a Hong Kong Chinese family. A nursing graduate and registered nurse in the Philippines, Helen initially hoped to work as a nurse in Canada. However, after becoming pregnant and receiving no support from her child's father, she committed to raising her son independently. Just one month after giving birth, Helen moved to Hong Kong for a domestic worker position, intending to support her son and her family of nine siblings back home in Kidapawan City, Southern Philippines. Though she had other options, including Saudi Arabia, Dubai, or Canada, where her sisters and friends had worked, Helen chose Hong Kong due to its proximity to the Philippines and what she perceived as relatively fairer labor laws for migrant workers, especially for a single mother like her.

Helen recalls her first year in Hong Kong as challenging. She arrived in March 2010 and struggled with her employer. "Matatayang lang ang nag-aabroad" (Only the brave go abroad), she said. She added, "Hindi mo pagmamay-ari ang katawan mo dito; pati damdamin kasi binabayaran ka e" (You don't own your life or emotions here; because you're being paid, you have to be docile). After a year, she managed to adjust, driven by her need to repay loans for her travel and processing expenses. Her family had even pawned their house and lot and borrowed Php 40,000 (roughly US\$800) from the agency that helped with her application. Unfortunately, Helen had to break her contract after a year and three months when her employer refused her leave to attend her grandmother's funeral.

Her second and third employers, however, provided much better conditions. With her second employer, she felt her nursing qualifications were appreciated when she successfully taught their one-and-a-half-year-old child to speak his first word, "dada." Impressed, she recalled they promoted her to the primary caregiver role and raised her salary from the minimum wage of HK\$3,800 to HK\$7,000. This experience reaffirmed her strength in childcare, which she described as her specialty: "Magaling ako sa bata" (I'm good with children). I now turn to the linguistic resources Helen identified and examine how these have become crucial for navigating her identity, sense of belonging, and the various transnational challenges associated with her having to leave the Philippines for work in Hong Kong.

4. Mapping Helen's Multilingual Resources

Helen identifies five 'languages' in her linguistic portrait (see Figure 1)—those she listed down after being prompted to map into the body silhouette the 'languages' (mga wika) or 'ways of speaking' (paraan ng pananalita) that she knows and/or uses. 'Ilonggo,' 'Visayan,' 'Tagalog,' 'English,' and 'Chinese' are discussed below, respectively.

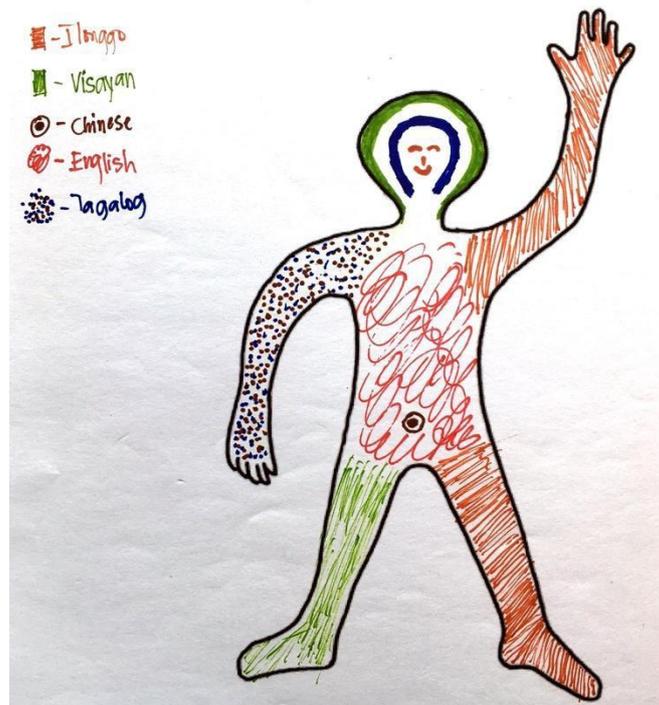


Figure 1. Helen's Linguistic Portrait

a. 'Ilonggo': Her heritage and identity

Born to and raised by an Ilonggo-speaking (Hiligaynon) family, Helen considers the language a mark of her heritage, her roots, and her identity. It is the language they speak at home and is therefore the code she and her son use whenever they talk to each other. This is why, she said, she placed it in the raised hand to connote its stature and importance in her life, and on the left leg to suggest that it is where and how she is rooted: "...sino ka? Ilonggo ako... proud ako na Ilonggo ako" (...who are you? I'm an Ilonggo... I'm proud to be Ilonggo') ((raises left hand and smiles)).

b. ‘Visayan’: Language for pan-regional communication

Growing up in a predominantly Visayan-speaking community, Helen considers herself ‘more fluent’ in Visayan when compared with the other languages she identified, which is why she placed it in the outer portion of the head. ‘Visayan,’ is the pan-regional lingua franca in the Visayas and Mindanao island groups (Tupas & Lorente, 2014). More than any other language, she identified Visayan as the code she is more comfortable using when chatting online and on social media. This code is what others might call ‘Cebuano,’ interchangeably referred to as ‘Bisaya.’ Her use of the ‘official’ linguistic nomenclature, Visayan, suggests a scholastic, if not political, influence since the ethnolinguistic group-specific terms Cebuano and Hiligaynon are broadly clustered into the place- or region-specific term Visayan (Gonzalez, 1998).

Aside from being a pan-regional communicative resource with her friends in the Philippines, Helen shares that Visayan is her secret code for talking to fellow Visayan-speaking Filipinos while doing grocery shopping in Hong Kong. This explains why she placed it on the right leg of the silhouette too, as it particularly enables her movement within her network in Hong Kong while simultaneously maintaining connections with her network of friends in the Philippines through communication technologies.

c. ‘Chinese’: Language of nourishment

Occupying a relatively small space in the body silhouette, but placed in, as the navel of the silhouette, Helen suggests that while ‘Chinese’ (which she later specified to be Cantonese) occupies a small part in her life, it is one that metaphorically nourishes it due to the economic possibilities it gives her, at least within her present workspace: “The more you know Cantonese, the more Hong Kong dollars you can get.” Helen notes that since her previous employers were not proficient in English, she had to learn to speak Cantonese through ‘body language.’ The little “Chinese” she claims to know, nonetheless, seems to be enough for her to navigate Hong Kong, talk to taxi drivers, and bargain and buy goods in the market.

d. ‘English’: Setting a family language policy

As a graduate of nursing and having passed the licensure examination to practice it, Helen considers English as a language that is within us [Filipinos] (explaining her placement in the body part of the silhouette). “Nasa atin na talaga. Pag-aralan natin o hindi yung English, nandyan na sa katawan natin” (It’s really in us. Whether we study it or not, English is in our body). She attributes this to the fact that English is the primary medium of instruction in schools

in the Philippines. However, Helen admits to having had to adjust to the British English standard of Hong Kong, such as knowing the counterpart for ‘elevator’ and ‘refrigerator,’ for example. Hong Kong was a British colony before it was ‘handed back’ in 1997 to the government in Beijing.

After finishing the coloring activity, she jokingly asked me in Filipino, “alam mo ba kung bakit ganyan ang [itsura] nya?” (do you know why it looks like this?). She then responds with a laugh: “Kasi yung English ko, bali baliko” (Because my English is broken), despite her possession of respectable proficiency in English as evidenced in her responses whenever she codeswitches to the language during the interviews. This self-deprecating metalinguistic commentary is similar to the observation of Osborne (2018) on the metapragmatic commentary, ‘Ay, nosebleed!’ [Oh, nosebleed!], which she noted among high school students in the Ilocos region, north of the Philippines, when she did interviews with them in a mixture of (‘deep’) Ilocano and English. Just as in Osborne’s interpretation of ‘Ay, nosebleed!’ Helen’s comment is also apparent in the ‘culturally-enregistered notions of shame’ (p. 119) based on imaginings of who can or cannot be expected to speak the more valued or prestigious linguistic variety, observable in the use of English in the Philippines (see also Tupas & Salonga, 2016, on the discussion of Unequal Englishes in the Philippines). Helen’s comment may thus be construed as a form of ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1981) serving as a face-saving metadiscursive attempt to deflect (possible) shame in front of a fellow Filipino. Nevertheless, as she continued her explanation and narratives, she seemed to portray herself as a proficient English speaker for setting what Bernard Spolsky (2012) might call a ‘family language policy’ in her domestic workspace. This can be seen in the extract below:

H: *Pag nanuod sila TV, ako ang boss sa amin. Pag nanuod ng TV bawal manuod ng Chinese. It should be English.* (When they watch on the television, I’m the boss. I don’t allow them to watch shows in Chinese. It should be English.)

N: *Bakit po?* [Why?]

H: *Kasi may subtitle nang Chinese. Nababasa mo sya. So narinig mo yung English, English yun. Chinese, nababasa mo.* [It’s because (English) shows would already have Chinese subtitles which they would be able to read. So they hear English while they read Chinese.]

N: *Ok po.* [OK.]

H: *Pero kung nanunuod ka ng Chinese, naririnig mo ay Chinese, hindi mo mababasa ang English kasi mabilis ang subtitle, right?* [But if they watch Chinese (shows), they would hear Chinese and would find it hard to read the English subtitles because it appears too quickly on the screen, right?]

N: *Uhuh.*

H: *So, pa'no ka matututong mag-English kung wala kang ginagawa?* [So, how would they learn English if they don't do anything?]

N: *Hmm. So yun po yung iniimplement nyo sa...* [Hmm. So, that's what you implement in...]

H: *Oo yun, sabi ko businessman ka. Para hindi lang Chinese ang kinakausap mo. You need to talk to me in English. Sa bahay, bawal mag-Chinese.* [Yes, that's it. I tell my employers that since they are businessmen, they need not transact only with the Chinese. (So,) they need to talk to me in English. In their home, I don't allow them to speak Chinese.]

N: *Wow.*

H: *'Pag sila, sasabihin ko. Gaganun na ako nyan ((raises her index finger)). English, please! Gaganun na ako.* [I would remind them about the rule by gesturing ((raises her index finger)), and saying English, please! That's how I tell them.]

N: *Wow. Ang cool.* [Wow. That's cool.]

H: *Kasi, parang. Pag sinabi ko, hindi talaga. Sasabihin ko, bakit? Where do you want to go when you go to college? Sa Australia. So bakit ka magcha-Chinese? So 'pag tinuturuan nya ako, 'pag di ko na kayang i-English, 'pag malalim na, ano 'to sa Chinese? Gaganun na kami. So, dapat mag-English ka. Tapos pag nandyan si babae, as long as possible, 'wag kang mag-Intsik. Dapat English.* [When I say no, it's no. And I ask my ward: where do you want to go for college? In Australia. Will you use Chinese there? But when I teach him, if I can no longer translate it in English, I would ask him what it is in Chinese. That's how we do it. So he should always speak in English. And when her mother is around, I tell him that as much as possible he should speak in English.]

In this account, Helen describes how she enforces a language policy within her host family's household by advocating for an "English-only" rule during their television viewing.

Given that her employers are businesspeople planning to send their children to study in Australia, Helen insists they watch English-language shows with Chinese subtitles. This, she reasons, allows them to absorb English terms and expressions more effectively than if the subtitles were also in English, as reading the rapidly changing English text might hinder their learning. On other occasions, when the family begins conversing in Chinese, she signals them to switch back to English by raising her index finger. As a compromise, she also agreed to learn Chinese (Putonghua) from them.

When asked about establishing this rapport, Helen explains that her “English-only” policy stems from the belief that, as business professionals, her employers should be proficient in English to communicate with non-Chinese (especially American) investors. Additionally, she insists that English fluency is essential for her wards, who will use it as their primary language of instruction in Australia. Helen’s approach reflects how her American-based education and English proficiency resonate with Hong Kong’s positive regard for American standards, as Bolton (2002) observed in post-1997 government, educational, and economic discourses.

Even on WeChat, a popular Chinese messaging platform, Helen maintains her language policy by requesting that her employers message her in English, despite the app’s translation feature. Now that her employers are divorced, she reports continuing to use English with her former male employer, who has returned to Mainland China. “If you show your employers you’re clueless, they’ll treat you that way,” she explains.

Through this language practice, Helen effectively ‘scale-jumps’ (Blommaert, 2007; Smith, 1996) from her position as a domestic worker to being more than ‘just a maid’ (see Lorente, 2018, p. 116). By asserting her English proficiency and aligning with the household’s aspirations, she strategically negotiates her symbolic standing, transforming from an “outsider” to an “insider” (see also Guinto, 2023, pp. 19–24) appreciated for both her language skills and her commitment to the family’s goals.

e. ‘Tagalog’: Language for communication with fellow Filipinos abroad

Helen lists Tagalog last, but does not seem to consider it of lesser value than the earlier ones she listed. Tagalog for Helen serves the purpose of connecting with fellow Filipino migrants in Hong Kong, hence her placement of the language in the right arm and hand. Tagalog is considered the lingua franca of Filipinos overseas (Tupas & Lorente, 2014) due to its wide use in the Philippine government, schools, and media alongside English, and for being the basis of

the national language, Filipino. It is thus the code first used in first meetings and introductions with fellow Filipinos, until they discover common ethnolinguistic origins, at which point they would switch to their common code. This is a communicative strategy for connecting with fellow Filipinos embodied in the typical conversation starter ‘Taga sa’an ka sa atin ‘te?’ (From where are you back home, sister?) (Peralta, 2004). As such, Tagalog is the language Helen says she uses when connecting with fellow Filipinos, which explains why she placed it in the lowered hand, or the hand used for handshakes, and in the inner portion of the head to draw a smiling face.

Helen also shares that she teaches her ward some Tagalog words and expressions, becoming an agent of sociolinguistic change in her own right. Helen recalls instances when a fellow Filipino would comment about her ward as being ‘pogi’ (handsome) while they are both on the train. She says her ward would look at her delighted, because he knows what it means. There are expressions her ward picked up from her as well, such as ‘Bastos!’ (‘rude’), which she says her ward now uses as a secret expression of anger with non-Tagalog-speaking peers.

5. Discussion and Conclusion: Multilingual Repertoire as Nexus of Transnational Life

In this paper, I explore Helen’s lived experiences through the lens of the linguistic resources she identifies as part of her communicative repertoire. Beyond illustrating her multilingual abilities, her metalinguistic narratives reveal how she leverages these languages to navigate, reinforce, and negotiate social and symbolic roles that shape her transnational migration experience, allowing her to exist ‘here and there’ simultaneously, what Rafael (1997) might call ‘spectral presences,’ albeit in this case, not economically, but linguistically driven.

Through Helen’s accounts, we see how she strategically employs distinct linguistic resources to maintain ties with home and community (using Ilonggo and Visayan), establish her place in Hong Kong (through Tagalog and Visayan), manage daily interactions and mobility (using Chinese), and reinforce her valued role within her host household through a language policy that highlights the global and aspirational status of English. Ilonggo allows her to remain connected as a mother and family member, while Visayan helps her link with friends both back home and in Hong Kong. Chinese facilitates her daily navigation, while English secures her standing within her employer’s family, aligning with their social and educational aspirations. Tagalog expands her social network with fellow Filipinos in Hong Kong.

The points above thus allow us to see Helen's linguistic repertoire as a crucial nexus for sustaining the "double lives" characteristic of migrant laborers. While this perspective illuminates how some foreign domestic workers may use linguistic and social resources to assert agency and adapt to new environments, it also points to the persistence of structural injustices that constrain migrant lives. Helen's narrative, however empowering, underscores that for many migrant workers, survival strategies and identity negotiation through language are situated within systems of exclusion, limited autonomy, and, often, exploitative conditions. These complexities reveal both the resourcefulness of foreign domestic workers and the continuing need to address the systemic inequalities that affect them.

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