

# Signals and Cross Signals

By Rosalinda A. Morales

**W**HEN AN AMERICAN was once asked why there seemed to be a growing strain in Philippine-American relations, he remarked that probably one of the reasons Americans and Filipinos fail to understand each other at times is that they speak the same language — often times in different ways. Because they communicate in English, they take it for granted that their words and gestures always convey the meanings they want to express. They get confused and hurt, even angry, if they misunderstand each other's motives. Probably, he continued, if they spoke different languages, they would be more careful in mak-

ing themselves understood; they would be more tolerant of mistakes and less impatient if misunderstanding arose. One is inclined to think he is right.

Before an American leaves for the Philippines, he is briefed on what to expect in the Islands. Since World War II, many Americans have come to realize that Filipinos are not savages and that one needs to have more than a pair of pants and an umbrella if he is to enjoy his stay here. Likewise, the Filipinos have learned that not all Americans are millionaires. There are also poor people in the United States — how can that be possible?

The American is told not to

worry because life in the Philippines is similar to life in the States — except that here one needs an air conditioner to survive the heat. He is also warned against some tropical diseases but as long as he boils his water and gets the necessary shots he is going to be all right.

The American rejoices at the thought that Filipinos speak English. He is therefore sure to find an English speaker even in the remotest barrios. There will be no problem of communication, or so he optimistically hopes.

It is true that the natives speak with a certain accent but that is all right. The Filipinos will most likely fail to stress the correct syllable, will say "I hope to see you leave" when he means *live*, will freely substitute *p* for *t*, *b* for *v*, *t* for *th* because his language does not have any of these sounds. He will probably ask "Where are you going?" with a rising intonation and stress every word in the sentence, "It is a beautiful day." But after some time, if the American is smart, he will learn to make the correct vowel or consonant substitutions mentally and understand what is meant by "I am happy to grate (greet) you." He will not be horrified when a new acquaintance tearfully says "Good bye. Till we mate (meet) again." After all,

what is one mispronounced word between friends?

Lapses due to faulty word order can also be forgiven. Surely, the American would understand what is meant by "I like very much Marilyn Monroe" or by "Sir, do you know if the American Embassy is where?"

But misunderstanding (or lack of understanding) is more likely to arise when a Filipino speaking English uses direct translations from the native language. Unless one knows Tagalog, how can he understand the following?

1. "Oh, I'm not delicate. Even coffee will do." (Hindi ako delikado. Kahit kape, puede na.) I'm not choosy. Coffee will do.

2. "You are very another now." (Ibang-iba ka na.) You've changed a lot.

3. "We can't move the amount..." (Hindi namin magagalaw ang kwarta...) We can't spend the money...

4. "I don't like him. He has no one talk." (Ayoko nga sa kanya. Wala siyang isang salita.) I don't like him. He goes back on his word.

5. "What do you want, a painful body?" (Anong hinahanap mo, sakit ng katawan?) Are you looking for trouble?

SUCH UN-ENGLISH expressions, however, are not likely to cause irritations in Philippine-American relations.

It is when an aspect of Philippine culture expressed by language (since language is bound to culture and vice versa) comes in conflict with American culture that grave misunderstandings may take place. This is possible especially if neither the American nor the Filipino is aware that the conflict is due to a cultural difference. In spite of the fifty-odd years of Americanization, the Filipino still thinks and acts and talks as a Filipino even if he is speaking in English. The Filipino must realize and admit this. The American must expect this. As Dr. Robert Lado says in *Linguistics across Cultures*,

Individuals tend to transfer the form and meanings and the distribution of forms and meaning of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture, both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives.

Thus we assume that a Filipino observing a certain behavior of an American will interpret it according to his own culture. The American in turn observes the Filipino behave in a certain situation and interprets it in terms of his own cul-

ture. It is obvious that misunderstanding is possible when the same behavior has different meanings in the two cultures or when different behavior patterns have only one meaning in both cultures. A few examples are in order.

A Filipino attending a meeting or a concert or any gathering where an American expects complete quiet and concentration on what is going on seems very impolite if he considers the gathering as a chance to trade notes with a friend he has not seen for quite some time. (Actually he is being impolite, but Filipino society seems to condone this kind of impoliteness.)

In the same way, the Filipino who does not feel right about eating without offering the food to the people around him or who does not think twice before putting an extra plate on the table for an unexpected guest would consider inhospitable an American who has no qualms about eating by himself while his guest waits for him in the living room.

Actually, the American is not being inhospitable. Unless she expects company, the American housewife prepares food enough only for her family. She is therefore not in a position to invite an unexpected guest for dinner. Besides, an American does not think of visiting at dinner time unless he has been invited for dinner.

The Filipino abroad gets invited to picnics, square dance sessions, weekend trips, lectures, plays, concerts. The American takes time out from his busy schedule so that the Filipino can see a summer play in Williamstown, for instance, or thrill to a symphony concert at Tanglewood, Massachusetts. Aware that nostalgia is keenest on Christmas Day, the American invites the Filipino to his home during the Christmas holidays. Who says that the Filipino has a monopoly on hospitality!

The American makes it a point to write a thank you note for favors received, like an invitation to a dinner or a gift on his birthday. He is therefore puzzled when his Filipino friend does not do so. The Filipino thinks that a spoken "thank you" is enough to show his appreciation.

**I**NCIDENTALLY, THE FILIPINO does not open a gift right after it has been given to him the way an American does. For some reason the Filipino who gives a gift feels he has to apologize for it. His embarrassment (because he feels his gift is not good enough) increases when his gift is opened in his presence.

The Filipino's love for fiestas can be interpreted in different ways. Although fiestas have

lost much of their religious significance, the Filipinos still consider them as a symbol of thanksgiving for some graces given by certain saints. Fiestas also offer opportunities for reunions with relatives and friends or they are simply an excuse for merrymaking. Who cares if tomorrow and the next three hundred sixty-three days the family has to live on rice and dried fish? *Bahala na. May awa ang Dios.* God will provide.

How does the American interpret the fiesta? He sees hordes going in and out of houses to eat and drink. He sees how the people fill up their plates. He thinks that the Filipino eats too much. Later, when he sees some food left on the plates, he thinks that the food is not good enough to finish up or the Filipino simply wastes food. He does not know that in Philippine culture it is considered improper to clean up one's plate. Heavens, does the guest want the host to think that he is so hungry that he has to eat up everything? But the American has not seen everything. Some guests would leave with paper bags filled with food. Surely, they cannot be that hungry! But the *balot* is for the children who are too young to go to the fiesta and for the grandparents left to mind them. Later, when the last plate has

been washed and dried, there will be more *balot* to take for those who helped make the fiesta a success.

The host is up to his neck making sure everybody is getting enough to eat. His daughters and nieces help him see to it that everybody is getting third helping. The hostess is in the kitchen supervising the preparation of the food. She does not need a caterer. She has a battalion of helpers—relatives, neighbors, friends. The young men are teased for eating very little because there are young women around.

The conversation at the dinner table may run this way:

Host: Please bear with us. We couldn't afford anything better. Be sure you eat well. Don't be shy.

Guest: Why, the food is excellent. I've eaten so much that I can hardly walk.

Host: Please have some more. *Habaan ninyo ang inyong kamay at umabot kayo.* (Literally, Make your arms long and reach for whatever you want), etc.

THE AMERICAN WATCHING this scene wonders at the drama which has preceded it. It hardly seems possible that these people now heartily partaking of the food are the same people who have just told their

host that he should not bother because they are not yet hungry.

He wonders why the host has to go through the painful process of practically pulling everyone so they would go to the dinner table. Why do guests have to be coaxed to eat? Because it is considered improper to rush to the dinner table at the first call! Imagine what happens when a Filipino invited to an American dinner acts as a Filipino. He is going to sound queer when he murmurs that he "isn't hungry yet" in the hope that the host will ask him again to come to the dinner table.

The Filipino is fond of big words. When he is at his best (?) he probably sounds like a walking thesaurus to an American. The Filipino in turn wonders at the "inadequacy" of the American vocabulary. A thing is "pretty good" or "pretty ugly" if it is not simply "nice" or "lovely." The American "gets" to a certain place; the Filipino "arrives" there. The Filipino "recollects," the American "looks back." Something "begins" and "ends" for an American; for the Filipino it "commences" and "terminates."

The Filipino cannot speak in public in a conversational manner; he has to orate. And before he "begins" to talk, he apologizes for his "inadequacy,"

his "lack of preparation."

When he says "My God" he does not think himself guilty of blasphemy. He is simply translating *Diyos ko* (literally, My God). He also often says "God willing" or "if God permits" whenever he talks of future plans. Again this is a translation from the native *kung may awa and Diyos* (literally, if God is merciful). The American who casually tells his Filipino friend, "I'll see you at the party tonight" should not be surprised to get the answer, "If God permits."

The Filipino answer to a Yes-No question in English is confusing to an American. In Tagalog, it is normal to answer *Oo, hindi ako pupunta* (Yes, I'm not going) in answer to the question *Hindi ka ba pupunta?* (Aren't you going?) The Filipino usually bases his answer on the question—whether it is given affirmatively or negatively. In English, the answer pattern is either Yes, I am; or No, I'm not. It does not matter whether the question is Are you going? or Aren't you going?

*Oh Oh* in Tagalog means yes; in English, it means No. *Uh huh*, however, means yes in English.

If an American asks for the bathroom, he does not want to take a bath. He simply does not want to say that he wants to go to the toilet in the same

way that the Filipino does. The Filipino, however, says, "May I go to the comfort room?" Then the American wonders what he means.

Tell a Filipina that her dress is pretty. Unless she is "State-side," she will not say "Thank you." She will say something like. "It's an old dress, really. I've had it for years." or "The material's very cheap. I got it at a sale." Or sometimes, she may say, "Is it only the dress that is pretty?" after which she is told, "The dress becomes lovelier because of the wearer."

Although the Filipino is embarrassed when paid a compliment, he loves to pay compliments. When someone greets another *magandang umaga*—good morning (literally, a beautiful morning) she usually gets the answer, *Maganda pa kayo sa umaga*. (You are more beautiful than the morning.) Not to be outdone, the other person will answer back, *Mas lalo na ang bumabati* (literally, the person greeting me is lovelier).

When one is told that he has become stout, he does not generally interpret it as a cue to go on a diet. It is a complimentary meaning, "You look much better now because you've put on a little more weight." In a country where tuberculosis is still a scourge, to be told that one is thin means that "You

are undernourished and should eat more." Or it may mean, "Probably the world has been treating you badly." Obesity is generally considered a sign of prosperity and well-being. Of course, there are modern girls who are calorie-conscious. To tell them that they have put on weight is fatal. It will mean more bending exercises and a carbohydrate-less diet for some time.

A Filipino who sees old men and women in a Home (for the aged) may easily conclude that the American does not care for the old. Certainly, such a practice of "getting rid" of the old is unthinkable in his country! The old are respected and continue to wield a powerful influence in and outside the home.

SUCH A CONCLUSION is made by the Filipino who does not understand the differences between the family set-up in the two countries. An American family is made up only of the father, the mother and the child. A Filipino family, however, includes the grandparents, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, cousins, the in-laws, the maids.

The Filipino family is closely knit and the child almost never ceases to be a child. He continues to be under the parental wing even after he has his own

children and his children have children of their own.

The American child's first break with his family, on the other hand, starts early—when he goes to college and when he is called to the service. When he gets married, he generally sets up his own home.

Since maids are a luxury very few people can afford in the States, the American housewife has to do all the household chores. Her husband helps her wash dishes or take care of the baby. (Incidentally, the Filipino who sees an American husband doing a woman's chores may think that the American male is henpecked and spoils his wife too much.)

Partly because of the lack of help in the average American home which makes it difficult to take on the additional burden of an aged or ailing parent, and mostly because both the child and the parent want to run their own separate lives, the parent does not live with his married child. He may stay in his old home or give it up and stay in a Home where he is well taken care of.

An American parent does not feel that his children want him out of the way. In fact he prefers this arrangement because he wants to remain independent. He may visit with his children for a week or so but

he generally does not live with them.

There are, of course, a few Filipinos who have become bicultural and will not react to certain situations the way the "typical" Filipino will. They do not commit blunders with the language either, because they have mastered English. That is, they know the "precise situations in which the varied sentences are used." Not only can they understand their American friends but they can also help them understand the Filipino as well. They thus make perfect ambassadors of goodwill.

The desire to understand and interpret correctly should come from both quarters. Reports of Philippine-American misunderstanding make it imperative that both sides realize that the friendship between the two countries long taken for granted cannot endure only by stirring up memories of Bataan and Corregidor.

It should be recognized by both countries that the Filipino, in spite of his Western trappings, is at heart a Filipino with his *amor propio*, his *jefe jefe bago quiere* (saying *no* the first time in the hope that he will be asked a second time), his desire to please and hence his evasiveness and his refusal to say a matter-of-fact *no*, his fatalism, his braggadocio, his love

for speech-making and picture-taking. He does not want to be pushed around or hurried but takes his own sweet time! He is often *naglalakad sa liwanag ng buwan* (literally, walking very slowly as lovers do on moonlit nights).

He cannot be efficient and businesslike. He believes in the extension of family ties to the *compadre* who may now be a bigwig in the government. And how he loves to make it known to everyone that the President or Congressman So-and-So is from his hometown. He loves to make a show of his religion. In fact, a politician can win a few thousand more votes by proclaiming his affinity with the Catholic Church. The Filipino enjoys singing and dancing and eating. He seldom worries about the future. If it is his fate to be poor, what can he do? *Kapalaran ko, di ko man hanapin, dudulong, lalapit, kung talagang akin* (literally, Even if I don't seek my fortune, it will come if it is really meant for me). Today he is enthusiastic about a project; by tomorrow, he has forgotten all about it. *Ningas kogon!* (*Kogon* is a kind of weed which when burned gives a very bright flame which dies very suddenly. *Ningas* is the Tagalog word for flame.)

Although the Filipino can sing the latest top tune from



Hollywood and can out-Presley Elvis Presley, he is still better at the *kundiman* and the *pandango*. Although he speaks English well, he is more eloquent in his native language. In short, a Filipino is a Filipino, not an imitation American.

Probably it is time that the two countries realize this truth: There are basic cultural and linguistic differences between the United States and the Philippines. Orientation for Americans being sent here should therefore go beyond telling them how hot and dusty it is in the Islands. Likewise, orientation for Filipinos going abroad should include other information besides what clothes to wear for winter. Such an orientation should be based on a systematic comparison of the

two countries with emphasis on the points in which they differ. As Dr. Charles Fries would put it, the comparison should be "minute and sympathetic, not for the purpose of evaluation in terms of one's practices or of finding the 'quaint' customs but in order to understand and to feel and to experience as fully as possible."

Moreover, as Professor Graham Wilson counsels, anyone traveling abroad should not only try to show sympathy and understanding for the culture he will observe while away from home; he should likewise "fortify his self-respect by also showing sympathy and understanding for the culture from which he comes." He must "learn about his culture and must be willing to explain it patiently to others."

### **Egyptian Enigma**

*Here's a possible solution for the scientists who haven't been able to figure out how the ancient Egyptians managed to build the Pyramids: for one thing, they didn't have coffee breaks.*

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