

# **Subject-Auxiliary Inversion in Embedded Questions in Spoken Professional Discourses: A Comparison of Philippine English Between 1999 and 2016-2019**

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## **Abstract**

Hardly any work has been done on the features of Philippine English in the clausal level from spoken discourses from a professional group. This paper compares the cases of inverted subject-auxiliary in embedded questions of the same group of professionals between 1999 and the years of 2016-2019, thus spanning almost 20 years. A total of 167 hits from a specialized corpus was uttered by 159 Filipino speakers during six types of professional discourses: interdisciplinary local and international research conferences; classroom discourses from Ph.D. in Linguistics and M.A. in English; basic and higher education seminar-workshops; university meetings; university professional English fora and symposia; and series of thesis defense. The first set of corpus was compared to the corpus of Philippines Component of the International Corpus of English compiled by Bautista, Lising, and Dayag (1999). It is composed of 20 sets of class lectures. Overall results show that Philippine English may have morphed into the use of inverted subject-auxiliary in embedded questions like in a sample utterance: “So we already know **what's** an entrepreneur” instead of “So we already know **what** an entrepreneur **is**.” It is initially argued that Philippine English in terms of embedded questions may have reached the endonormative stabilization stage. Arguably, if inversions have been fossilized among professionals, they may be considered a (new) emerging feature of the Philippine English. Limitations and trajectories are offered in this paper.

**Keywords:** Embedded questions, ICE-PHI, noun phrase, Philippine English, prescriptive grammar

## **Introduction**

The discourse of World Englishes since its inception (Kachru, 1985) remains at the level of sociolinguistic processes such as nativization, hybridization, localization, acculturation and/or indigenization (Tupas, 2004). Postcolonial

countries show propensity to manifest a kind of linguistic independence (Tupas, 2008) that may deflect from the norms of native speakers. Hu (2015) posits that the trend of English use is not aligned to the framework of the native language anymore. Non-native speakers may also question the merits of the Inner Circle's linguistic hegemony as the only "correct" way of using English (Mahboob, 2010). Thus, the normativity of the natives is now slowly eroding, thereby giving speakers around the world a kind of sundry Englishes.

"Errors" from a variety of English may not be taken as an impoverished version of the standard English. Instead, they are now considered as special features made in utility within the immediate speech community of local speakers without constraints from the prescriptive rules of the Inner Circle. Mahboob and Elyas (2014), for example, report that Saudi English is marked with the use of present perfect tense used by textbook authors to narrate events that already happened in the past, without any connection to the present. Other recorded variations include the use of subject-verb agreement and the use of singular and plural markers for nouns.

Variations from the norms of the Inner Circle also occur inevitably in Philippine context. Bautista (2000) shares that Philippine English shows a lack of (or faulty) subject-verb agreement, inappropriate use of articles, faulty preposition usage, the incorrect pluralization of nouns, the lack of (or faulty) agreement of pronoun and its antecedent, and faulty tense-aspect usage combinations. Jubilado (2016) also reports that Filipino speakers of English in Hawaii observe Verb-Subject-Object sentence pattern as opposed to English Subject-Verb-Object pattern; fronting or topicalization; object deletion; copula deletion; and SV-(dis)agreement.

Amid the growing literature discussing the Filipino-ness of Philippine English, it is remarkable how little attention is paid to grammatical features at the clausal level from oral discourses among professional groups. Collins, Yao and Borlongan's (2014) study investigated Philippine English at relative clauses levels such as *that*-relatives and *wh*-relatives diachronically, but the corpus was in written modalities such as press, learned writing and fiction. To my knowledge, my study is the first attempt to initially document the cases of subject-auxiliary inversion in embedded questions, which has become a renewed interest among researchers from different linguistic landscapes (e.g., Brantmeier, Callender, & McDaniel, 2011; Lipták & Zimmermann, 2007; Pozzan & Quirk, 2014; Stringer, 2015).

This present study takes up a special corpus I personally collected. I compared these inversions to the possible cases of Subj-Aux inversions available in the Philippines Component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-PHI) compiled by Bautista, Lising, and Dayag (1999). Thus, this comparative study is between 1999 and 2016-2019, thus spanning almost 20 years. Comparison of these inversions to that of the Inner Circles' is left for future studies.

## **The Philippines as a postcolonial, multilingual country**

Philippine English can be first traced back to its origins in the US intervention of 1898 and the first teachers known as “Thomasites” who arrived in 1901 (Bolton & Bautista, 2008). English had become the first medium of instruction when US President William McKinley issued a Letter of Instruction on 7 April 1900 (Bernardo, 2008). From then on, Filipinos learned English rapidly although English was first cultivated by a small number of US colonial officials (Gonzalez, 1997, as cited in Bolton & Butler, 2008).

One case that attests to Filipinos’ confidence in English was the publication of the first modern short story in English written by Paz Marquez-Benitez, one of the founders of Philippine Women’s College in 1919 (now, Philippine Women’s University). Her short story, “Dead Stars” published in 1925 marked “the landmark of the maturity of the Filipino writer in English” (Santiago, 2015, para. 7). Toward the end of US colonialism, the “growth of English writing signaled the assertiveness of the Americanized intellectuals turned out by the universities” (Lumbera & Lumbera, 2005, p. 103).

“Deterioration” of English was also noted by some scholars. Thirty years ago, Babst-Vokey (1988) bared three phases of English in print media in the Philippines. The first phase covers the “elegant, Europeanized” English, characterized by correct grammar, which is also true in the third phase. The second phase, however:

...was the most dismal one of the three, covering the period of the Martial Law years. This was the time when newspapers and magazines were dominated by men and women who clearly could not write, and who obviously did not use English as their language for communicating anything but the simplest thoughts. When they tried something even just slightly more complicated, their English deteriorated into gibberish, abusing the most basic rules of grammar, unity, coherence and emphasis. (p. 88)

The multicultural and multilingual set-up of the Philippines has precipitated “language conflict/rivalry” (Sibayan, 1988, p. 93) between English, Filipino and other regional languages (Bautista, 2004; Bolton & Bautista, 2008; Dayag, 2008; Eugenio & Ogena, 1988; Lapira, 1988; Lockwood, Forey, & Price, 2008; McFarland, 2008; Pascasio, 1988; Sibayan, 1985). Recently, the “Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education” from Kinder to Grade 3 that commenced last school year 2012-2013 supplanted the country’s bilingual education policy, thus displacing English and Filipino as the mediums of instruction (Tupas, 2011). As recalled, Bautista (1988) predicted that English would be relegated into a foreign language, which happens to be otherwise because English continues to be the second language in the Philippines. Sibayan (1985) predicted that the future of a modern and intellectual Pilipino is irreversibly Taglish (a portmanteau of Tagalog and English).

A decade ago, Tayao (2008) classifies Philippine English as a result from the Type A macrolanguage acquisition process. “It has evolved with little input from native speakers except in the initial stage, when English was transplanted in the country as a colonial language upon the annexation of the Philippines from Spain by the United States in 1898” (p. 157). To date, the status of Philippine English may be still at the tension between nativization and endonormative stabilization based on assertions made by Borlongan (2016), Martin (2014), and Schneider (2007, 2003).

### **The Filipino-ness of Philippine English**

Bautista (2008) claims that Philippine English variety can be first traced back to the maiden publication of Teodoro A. Llamzon’s *Standard Filipino English* in 1969, a way earlier than to that of Kachru’s (1985) work on “Three Circles.” The book includes a two-page description on Filipinism with “English expressions which are neither American nor British, which are acceptable and used in Filipino educated circles, and are similar to expression patterns in Tagalog” (Llamzon, 1969, p. 46, as cited in Bautista, 2008, p. 219).

Aside from grammatical features and distinct accent (Bautista, 1988; Bolton & Bautista, 2008; Tayao, 2008), Philippine English is investigated at the discourse level and contrastive studies (Genuino, 2002). Studies like these exemplify that Filipinos attempt to accommodate the pattern of the Inner Circle, at the same time, establish a kind of autonomy from the standards of the natives. At heart, special features of Philippine English may be predictable in nature. Needless to say, the production of English is influenced by the transfer of L1 knowledge to the target language which is also the case of other studies of errors in English (e.g., Lado, 1957; Yildiz, 2016).

### **Grammatical scope**

The grammatical scope of this study is in the clausal level of embedded questions. An embedded question is a question that has been transposed into a subordinate clause like in example number 2:

- (1) What **is love**? (S-AUX inverted; matrix question)
- (2) I wanna know **what love is**. (non-inverted, normal S-AUX)
- \* (3) I wanna know **what is love**. (inverted, unacceptable, non-prescriptive)

“What love is” as a noun clause is the embedded question that is now part of a longer clause. While subject-auxiliary inversion is restricted to matrix questions (Henry, 1995), the syntactic arrangement of an embedded question should not be inverted. To prescriptively say, inversion of subject-auxiliary should not occur in embedded questions (Fromkin & Rodman, 1983; Murphy, 2004; Radford, 2009). Example 2 shows that “what love is” functions as the object (Biber et al., 1999).

Because there are also native speakers who invert Subj-Aux positions in embedded questions (cf. Henry, 1995; Wolfram & Schilling, 2015), this study is also anchored on prescriptive grammar in standard English (e.g. Azar & Hagen, 2016; DeCapua, 2017; Herring, 2016). One of the reasons is that the speakers under study are professional teachers/researchers, in what DeCapua (2017) maintains:

Prescriptive grammar as the “grammar taught in school, discussed in newspaper and magazine columns on language and on various social media, or mandate by language academies... tells people how they should say something, what words they should use, when they need to make a specific choice, and why they should do so. (p. 10)

## **Methodology**

### ***Corpus producers***

Participants were 156 Filipino professionals who represented both public and private educational institutions in the Philippines. They represented the disciplines of language education, literature, applied linguistics, health and allied sciences, law, foreign service, mathematics, social studies, IT education, journalism, philosophy, and music education, to mention a few. Likewise, there were chances when the speakers' titles were recognized such as doctorate. The demographic profile of the speakers was not secured because it is not relevant in this study.

### ***Corpus collection***

Documentation commenced in the middle of 2016 and lasted until 22 February 2019. It took place during six professional discourses presented in Table 1. I was present during these discourses either being a presenter, delegate, participant as a committee chair in a meeting; resource speaker, panelist, and as a then-Ph.D. student. No permission was sought because I did not record the whole proceedings. I only noted the speakers' “ungrammatical” utterances and were automatically encoded into MS Word.

All presentations were seen to be spontaneous and unscripted. Because the discourses were considered naturally-occurring and non-experimental, they have afforded one advantage of doing away with the “observer's paradox” (Labov, 1984). Consequently, a total of 159 professionals produced a meager of 167 hits of inverted Subj-Aux in embedded questions. I personally believe that these instances have at least yielded an initial representative view of these occurrences.

Table 1  
*The distribution of speaker per type of discourse*

Types of Discourse	Researcher's Role	Gender		Total Inversions
		Female	Male	
Interdisciplinary research conferences (local and international)	Presenter, participant	42	38	80
Ph.D. in linguistic and M.A. in English classroom discourses	Ph.D. student, professor	13	9	22
Basic and higher education seminar-workshops and fora	Resource speaker, participant	17	13	30
University meetings	Participant	9	2	11
University professional English fora	Participant, speaker	5	3	8
Thesis defense	Panelist	4	4	8
	Total	90	69	159

During oral discourses, I considered pausing as a suprasegmental feature for documentation. When a pause was employed, the clause was not considered an “error” because the pause signals the offing of an independent, matrix question clause (Henry, 1995). When no pause was audible, then I treated that as inversion of subjects and auxiliaries. I also noted the discourse fillers such as *ahhh*, *mmm* as boundary markers between two clauses. To illustrate:

- (1a) Correct: You have to tell me [pause]: what does this mean?
- (1b) Incorrect/Inverted: You have to tell me what does this mean.
- (2a) Correct: I actually asked them, mmm, ahhh, “Why did you fail?”
- (2b) Incorrect/Inverted: I actually asked them why did you fail?
- (2c) Correct: I actually asked them why they failed.

### ***Comparative analysis***

To compare whether these inversions are also present around 1999 in the Philippine setting, I traced the corpus of “The Philippines Component of the International Corpus of English” (ICE-PHI) with the aid of AntConc, a concordancing tool (Anthony, 2014) for instant tracking of *Wh*-questions. The Philippines English component contains different genres of spoken texts. I only

traced the corpus of “public class lessons” under “dialogue section”. The choice of this group of corpus was based on compatibility (Friginal & Hardy, 2014) with my specialized corpus, spoken by professional teachers/researchers. There are 20 spoken texts under “class lessons” marked S1B-001 to S1B-020.

To confirm the contexts of these clauses, I personally re-checked the corpus manually without help from any external expert because the grammatical feature under study is rather basic and the number of ICE-PHI are rather manageable. Just like my own corpus, I did not code the utterances as inverted cases when short ( <, >) and long pauses ( <,, >) are annotated in ICE-PHI. Likewise, the following examples were not coded as they may introduce complete, didactic questions used by the teachers (in boldface):

<ICE-PHI:S1B-001#18:1:A>

What I mean by that is **how did using the child's or the student's first or second language affect his or her learning of a particular subject matter**

<ICE-PHI:S1B-001#103:1:A>

The next step of studies would have the next step of studies would deal with the question **why do we see these things** <indig> 'no </indig>

<ICE-PHI:S1B-007#127:1:A>

She uh <, > yes she she said the immediate reaction that she had was **how does one read this**

## Results

### *Pattern of inverted subj-aux in embedded questions from 2016-2019*

Table 2 reveals the inversion of subjects and auxiliaries in embedded questions. These clauses are classified into seven types such as the *what*, *how*, *who*, *why*, *where*, *which*, and *when*, according to their frequency.

Table 2

*Types of inverted embedded questions*

Sorts	Example Inversion	Hits
What	They can identify <b>what are the lexical items here.</b>	78
How	Step 1 presents <b>who does the author present the territory.</b>	60
Who	Can I know <b>who are the balik-scientists in this room?</b>	11
Why	We were wondering <b>why did they fail.</b>	6

Where	I worry about <b>where can we get the financial assistance.</b>	6
Which	We should know <b>which direction should we take.</b>	3
When	Do you have technologies to predict <b>when does earthquake occur?</b>	3
Total		167

#### Noun Embedded Clause (What- Inversion)

1. Can we know what time **will he** come.
  - Prescriptive: Can we know what time **he will** come?
2. We can also ask the office what subjects **do we** need to enroll.
  - Prescriptive: We can also ask the office what subjects **we need** to enroll.

#### Noun Embedded Clause (How-Inversion)

1. I am quite certain how **am I** handling myself.
  - Prescriptive: I am quite certain how **I am** handling myself.
2. The idea applied to how do the writers attribute the original author.
  - Prescriptive: The idea applied to **how the writers attribute** the original author.

#### Noun Embedded Clause (Who-Inversion)

1. The grouping will determine of **who will be** the leaders in the group.
  - Prescriptive: The grouping will determine of **who the leaders** in the group **will be**.
2. It would be hard for me to know **who are** the entrepreneurs.
  - Prescriptive: It would be hard for me to know **who** the entrepreneurs **are**.

#### Noun Embedded Clause (Why-Inversion)

1. It depends on the speech **why do they** choose that specific language.
  - Prescriptive: It depends on the speech **why they choose** that specific language.
2. I will demonstrate why **is it** that so.
  - Prescriptive: I will demonstrate why **it is** that so.

#### Noun Embedded Clause (Where-Inversion)

1. Because we really wanted to know **where does** really this person belong to.
  - Prescriptive: Because we really wanted to know **where** this person really **belongs**.
2. We need to understand **where is** the university heading for.



- Prescriptive: We need to understand **where** the university **is** heading for.

#### Noun Embedded Clause (Which-Inversion)

1. It will inform us on which plan **are we** going to follow.
  - Prescriptive: It will inform us on which plan **we are** going to follow.
2. We should know which directions **should we** take.
  - Prescriptive: We should know which directions **we should** take.

#### Noun Embedded Clause (When-Inversion)

1. We cannot predict when **will be** the dry season.
  - Prescriptive: We cannot predict when the dry season **will be**.
2. Can anyone tell me when **will be** the last day of enrollment?
  - Prescriptive: Can anyone tell me when the last day of enrollment **will be**?

As shown, the pattern of the different types of embedded questions shows the inversion of subjects and auxiliary verbs. Prescriptively, they are not supposed to be inverted in order to suit these independent clauses into their new syntactic environment as dependent clauses. On the one hand, the presence of operator “does/do” should not be present. Biber et al. (1999) mention that the *wh*-clause can occur in subject and object positions. The whole embedded questions which are not supposed to be inverted can be termed as “wh-in-situ question” that functions as the direct object complement placed immediately after the verb (Radford, 2009, p. 184). From the corpus, the pattern illustrates that the embedded noun clauses are object of the independent clauses, not the subject ones, thus are mainly introduced by prior clauses.

Although the sample “errors” were spoken by professional teachers/researchers who must have been introduced to some prescriptive rules of standard English, the cases of these inversions may be forgivable. Biber et al. (1999) posit that noun phrases can be challenging because they have a very complex syntactic architecture and can undergo several layers of embedding. In these occurrences, it is clear that these professionals still inverted the subjects and auxiliaries in their normal positions from a complete question forms (DeCapua, 2017).

#### *Comparison to ICE-PHI around 1999*

Surprisingly, among the 20 spoken texts, there are only two recorded inverted subjects and auxiliaries from embedded questions, spoken by two professors (Professor 4 and Professor 16).

<ICE-PHI:S1B-004#82:1:A>

So we already know **what's** an entrepreneur but are there certain types of entrepreneurs

<ICE-PHI:S1B-016#25:1:A>

Now tell me **what 's** the difference between grouped and ungrouped data

Looking at these inversions, no short nor long pauses have been annotated. It means that they must be considered as inversions of the subjects *entrepreneur* and *difference*, and auxiliary verb *is*. Likewise, the same Professor 16, from lines #106, #109, and #149, did not invert the subjects and auxiliary verbs. Looking at one case of Professor 16's inverted Subj-Aux, it may convey that this his/her sole "error" is isolated, considering that the other utterances were non-inverted:

<ICE-PHI:S1B-016#106:1:A>

You really don't know **how the values in between vary**

<ICE-PHI:S1B-016#109:1:A>

The limitation of the range is is that you would not know **how the values between the highest and the lowest <.>va<./> vary**

<ICE-PHI:S1B-016#149:1:A>

Now <,> if I want to know **how each day is doing** each day 's **sale is doing** in comparison to the average I am going to take the deviation from the mean right

### ***Implications***

My specialized data are for initial corpus building. Nevertheless, implications for these "errors" may remain relevant. Firstly, we cannot dispel the interlanguage interference (Pozzan & Quirk, 2014). A direct transliteration may be the culprit to this "error. For example, either "bakit siya umalis" ((Why did she leave?)) in example sentence number 3, is taken separately as an independent clause or is embedded in a longer clause, the structure remains unchanged. In Tagalog, no non-inversions occur from the original matrix questions.

(3)

**Bakit siya umalis?** (*matrix question*)

**[Sinabi niya sa akin kung] [bakit siya umalis.]** (*embedded, unchanged*)

\*[She told me]

[why did he leave.]

Secondly, Mahboob (2014) explicates how variations in the use, meanings and structures of Englishes occur. He shares three dimensions such as (1) users of Englishes, (2) uses of Englishes, and (3) modes of communication. The first dimension zeroes in on the issues on sociolinguistic and intercultural communication. The second dimension expounds the purpose of the language which he uses the term "register variation." The third dimension is the two

modalities of speaking and writing, or a combination of both.

We may categorize the speakers from this study in the “high” social distance. Given that these professionals may come from the same speech community, and that they had identical purpose of presenting research results and related purposes, I argue that they may also observe “low” social distance. There may be a shift from a low to a high social distance, vice versa, as they engage in discourses. That is, the inversion of subject-auxiliary position is still acceptable especially that the meanings are kept intact, and intelligibility is achieved. Looking only at the smaller units of language variation can impede one’s understanding about the ways a certain speaker creates a larger meaning (Mahboob, 2010; Martin, 2014).

Therefore, these inversions should not be considered as “low quality of English as a non-intellectualized variety of Philippine English” (Sibayan, 1988, p. 93). They are not “impoverished versions of the target languages but as natural grammars in their own right” (Stringer, 2015, p. 104). Further, Stringer challenges the concept of errors from the World Englishes tradition by pointing out that “interlanguages are indeed natural languages in the same sense as L1s, they are systematic...” (p. 104).

Thirdly, the acceptability of these inversions is still debatable. A few would still repudiate to the preponderance of emerging features of a certain variety of Englishes. While the following perceptions I collected are not intended to provide an imprudent generalization, nevertheless, these opinions can illuminate universal glimpse of sentiments and tensions of acceptance and repudiation of the varieties of English:

- If meanings are not distorted, why bother? [*Philosophy professor*]
- It is disappointing: I’ve been studying correct English since elementary only to find out it can be tweaked in the discourse of intelligibility. [*Student, Speech and Public Speaking*]
- The Philippines is not ready for World Englishes. [*A TV and media personality*]
- Majority said the content you are trying to convey is the most important. But I’ve come to realised that being grammatically correct is the way to convey something if you want to be called professionals. (*A call center agent with an international account*).

I documented another case of non-acceptance to inverted subject-auxiliary positions. I once corrected the label of the episode of a TV series in the Philippines published on Youtube. My intention was to test whether the writer would stick to the original, inverted embedded clause (Figure 1). In a few minutes, the writer corrected the clause (Figure 2). What this means is that the writer must have admitted his/her “fault.”

Lastly, we are also curious if these “errors” have been observed in classrooms. We expect teachers to “have a firm grounding in the grammar of the language they are teaching” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2008, p. 1),

and even those who are not teaching the language explicitly, but are also using English as a medium of instruction.



Figure 1. Original inverted noun clause



Figure 2. Edited, non-inverted noun-clause

## Conclusion

By and large, teachers around the year 1999 when the ICE-PHI corpus was collected showed the propensity to use prescriptive rules of non-inversion of subject-auxiliary in embedded questions. By contrast, teachers and researchers who were documented between 2016-2019 exhibited the tendency to invert subject-auxiliary even if these clauses have been transposed to function as objects in the sentences. Although not conclusive, results show that after almost 20 years, Philippine English may have morphed into the use of inverted Subj-Aux in embedded questions as if these embedded questions remain the matrix questions (Henry, 1995), like in the sample utterances:

<ICE-PHI:S1B-004#82:1:A>

So we already know **what's** an entrepreneur.

Instead of...

So we already know **what** an entrepreneur **is**.

In fairness, there were also professionals from my corpus who did not invert Subj-Aux whose utterances also deserve documentation. My goal is to initially document these inversions and allow my readers to answer my personal questions: (1) Are these non-inversions forgivable with the idea in mind that they are professional teachers/researchers? And (2) If these non-inverted clauses are established to have been fossilized among the professional speakers, can they be considered new (emerging) features of Philippine English? Stringer (2015) crystallizes in his study of *Wh*-questions that "... the arbiters of change and the settlers of new standards are precisely people communicating in these contexts in which English is used for intranational purposes: in the realms of public education, business transactions, courtrooms, political debates, and broadcast media" (p. 126).

This initial documentation has limitations. Firstly, diachronic studies may be helpful by collecting corpus from online sources, and compare them to neighboring Asian Englishes. Secondly, local varieties of English are incriminated side by side with the Inner Circle (Giri, 2015; cf. Smith, 2018). It would be helpful to compare these features to that of American or British English whose speakers also invert Sub-Aux (cf. Belfast English by Henry, 1995, pp. 105-123). Wolfram and Schilling (2015) remind that "...inverted word order as in *She asked could she go to the movies*, is becoming just as much a part of informal spoken general American English" (p. 388). Lastly, this study did not have enough representatives from different disciplines. Future studies may document substrate-influenced Philippine Englishes such as Philippine Chinese English; Yaya English; and 'X-Englishes' such as Hokaglish" (Gonzales, 2017).

While the initial data spotlight a pattern, it remains erudite to claim that Philippine English in terms of embedded question clauses has morphed into endonormativity given the very limited corpus and the intentional non-comparison of these occurrences to that of the Inner Circles'. Arguing that Philippine English has reached stage 4 endonormative stabilization is non-conclusive. I acknowledge these limitations and hope that researchers would fill in these research spaces to further support Borlongan's (2016) assertion that Philippine English is dispatching itself from the stage 3 nativization level as claimed by Scheider (2003), as it has claimed the stage 4 spot of endonormative stabilization. To this end: I am then excited to know *who are* these researchers!

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank “The Philippines Component of the International Corpus of English” (ICE-PHI) and the Department of English and Applied Linguistics, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines, and Bautista, Lising, and Dayag (1999), for the license and access to the corpus. I would also like to thank the editor and her team for their punctiliousness.

## Declaration

No conflict of interest to report as this paper was carried out without help from any funding agency.

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