Language, employment, and settlement: Temporary meat workers in Australia

Abstract: Australia is one of the world’s largest beef exporters. However, meat processing jobs are widely considered undesirable and are increasingly filled with employer-sponsored migrant workers on temporary long-stay visas. Against this background, our paper explores the role of language in the employment and migration trajectories of a group of meat processing workers from the Philippines in a small town in rural Australia. Methodologically, we employ a case study approach combining macro-data from language and migration policy documents and media reports with micro-data from ethnographic fieldwork. We explore the role of language in recruitment, in the workplace, during leisure time, and in gaining permanent residence in Australia. To begin with, language is not a recruitment criterion as the primary visa holder is hired on the basis of a so-called ‘trade test,’ i.e., observed at butchering work in the Philippines by an Australian recruiter. Spouses of the primary visa holder are also issued a temporary visa and are offered unskilled employment in the same plant. Once in Australia, the participants had few opportunities to practice English at work or in the community. In this way, temporary migrants came to Australia with limited English and had limited opportunities to improve their English in the country. However, visa extensions or the conversion of their temporary visa to a permanent residency visa is contingent upon their English language proficiency and only granted if they achieve a score of Level 5 or above on the IELTS (International English Language Testing System). Because of their limited education and limited practice opportunities, this proficiency level was out of the reach of most of our participants. We conclude by arguing that – in a context where de facto there is no need for English language proficiency – the imposition of English language proficiency requirements for visa extensions and for permanent residency serves to secure the permanent contingency of a sector of the agricultural work force. In a neoliberal global order where the value of agricultural exports and the unemployment rate are fluctuating unpredictably, English language proficiency requirements have thus become a politically acceptable way to ensure a ‘flexible’ labor supply.

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1 Introduction

Ever since the publication of Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* in 1906, the slaughterhouses of advanced industrial and post-industrial societies have been known to be sites of exploitative working conditions. In the US, partly under the influence of *The Jungle*, the first half of the 20th century witnessed greater regulation of the meat industry, both with regard to labor rights, animal welfare, and food safety standards. With market deregulation since the Reagan years, labor rights in particular have been eroded and exploitation of immigrant workers in the US meat industry today has reached such levels that it has been identified as a major human rights concern by Human Rights Watch (Greenhouse 2005).

The US food industry has been a major driver of neoliberal economic globalization (Schlosser 2002) and the meat industry now competes globally. In a highly industrialized environment, it has become difficult to achieve further productivity gains through technologizing the process of meat production any further. Consequently, a ‘flexible’ labor force – i.e., one that can be deployed quickly, is low-waged, has limited rights and benefits, and can also be discharged quickly in the event of a downturn – has become a key means to keep consumer prices low and corporate profits high (McDowell 2009). In a globally integrated market, US labor practices have spread globally, different national regulatory environments notwithstanding, as is exemplified by the fact that Canadian meat packers were allowed to slash wages in the 1990s by 40 percent in order to compete with US corporations (Vandean 2003).

Globally, the reliance on an immigrant workforce has been an important means to achieve labor flexibility in the meat packing industry, as it has been in many other low-skilled and low-wage occupations where a productivity ceiling has been reached (McDowell 2009). From the Lithuanian immigrants who tried to survive ‘the jungle’ of the Chicago slaughterhouses in Sinclair’s
contemporary US meat-workers are likely to hail from Mexico and other Central American countries (Stull & Broadway 2004) and, as often as not, their visa status is undocumented (Camayd-Freixas 2008). Canadian and Australian meat-workers are more likely to enter the country under temporary visa arrangements and to come from Central America and the Caribbean in Canada (Leach 2013) and from Brazil, China and the Philippines in Australia (Winning 2009). We argue that in these more regulated environments where the role of illegal immigrants in the workforce is comparatively small, language assessment comes to play a similar role to that of illegal visa status in the US: language becomes a covert mechanism in labor and migration policy (see Piller & Cho 2013, for a similar argument in a different context).

A number of reports have raised the issue of lack of English language proficiency of migrant meat workers as an occupational health and safety concern and also an aspect of their overall vulnerability to exploitation (e.g., Vandean 2003; Williams 2007). However, to the best of our knowledge, a systematic exploration of the intersection between language and labor in industrial meat production in global corporations is missing to date. This article is designed to address this lacuna and to contribute to language policy research at the intersection of corporate and state policy. Specifically, we ask when and how language and specific linguistic proficiencies become relevant at work and during migration and settlement (see also Nelson, this issue). Language at work is governed by a corporate regime and language in migration is governed by the state. These language regimes do not always operate in sync and sometimes even conflict, and thus we are also interested in how workers negotiate the language regimes they are confronted with.

In the following, we begin by providing an overview of the industry and migration contexts in which our case study is embedded. Our case study is of Filipino workers on a temporary work visa in an Australia-based multinational meat export enterprise. Relevant contexts thus include Australian meat production for a global market and the Australian temporary work visa scheme. We will then introduce our fieldwork site, a small town in rural Australia, which we will call ‘Tiny Town.’ Tiny Town is dominated by one of Australia’s largest meat exporters, a company we will call ‘Big Beef.’ Participants include six Filipino workers resident in Tiny Town and employed by Big Beef. Based on interview data we will describe the role of English language proficiency in the recruitment process, multilingualism at Big Beef and outside work in Tiny Town, and, finally, English language requirements for settlement. We conclude by arguing that language has become a key aspect of managing global labor, even in purely manual jobs such as meat processing. Corporate and state language policies help to ensure worker flexibility while also serving to make labor
and migration schemes that might otherwise be considered exploitative, politically acceptable to the Australian public, including the trade unions.

2 Global meat and global labor

Since the horsemeat scandal hit Europe in early 2013, even the most unconcerned consumers have been forced to face the fact that meat production is now a global industry with meat sourced, processed, and consumed in many different places. For many years, Australia has been a major player in the global meat trade. In 2011–12, Australia was the world’s largest beef exporter. In that year, 66 percent of all Australian beef was exported and beef exports were valued at $4.69 billion (Meat and Livestock Australia 2013). That year also saw the largest ever absolute amount of beef exported from Australia, a staggering 963,000 tons of beef in addition to Australia’s controversial live export trade (Robinson 2013). In 2012 the main destinations for Australian beef were Japan and the USA, followed by a range of other countries, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. In light of the research we present here, it is particularly ironic that the fourth largest importer of Australian beef was the Philippines (MLA Market Information Service 2012).

Despite the fact that Australia exports more beef than any other country and despite the importance of the beef industry to the Australian economy, the Australian beef industry only produces about 4 percent of the world’s beef supply. This means that the pricing ability of the Australian beef industry is minuscule and dependent on developments in bigger meat production markets, particularly the USA (‘Australia’s beef cattle industry’ 2007). As we pointed out in the introduction, one way to guard against the vagaries of global markets and to maintain competitiveness in a volatile and unpredictable market has been through reducing the cost of labor.

The emergence of industrial meat production in Australia in the late 19th century was accompanied by the development of a strong meat workers’ union, the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU), which was established in 1906. For various reasons, mostly related to short periods of high profitability punctuated by longer periods of low profitability, industrial relations in the industry were highly conflictual until the 1980s, and the meat industry was seen as strike-prone (O’Leary 2008). As employer associations during that period were relatively weak, meat workers were able to achieve favorable employment conditions and relatively high wages.

That changed in the 1980s when the industry crashed for reasons related to over-expansion, a drought that saw Australian cattle herds decimated, and
a boom in US beef production. Over a number of years, concentration in the industry, such as the emergence of the Australia Meat Holdings conglomerate combined with state policies favoring employers, resulted in a weakening of the union and the institution of low-wage awards, the abolition of the ‘tally system’ (where workers had been paid per unit of throughput rather than per time worked), the expansion of work hours, and the disappearance of overtime penalties (O’Leary 2008). This has meant that meat work has become relatively unattractive for Australian workers and has resulted in persistent labor shortages.

These changes in the industry have since become enmeshed with a change in migration policy: in 1996 Australia instituted a temporary work visa scheme in response to employer demands for greater labor flexibility, as did many other countries during the same period (Tham & Campbell 2009). Originally introduced by a Conservative government in 1996, the scheme, which is popularly known as ‘457 visa’ on the basis of its subclass number, the temporary work visa scheme is intended to attract workers to Australia in areas where there are skills shortages. Entrants under the scheme are sponsored by an employer and need to have skills that are listed on a state-issued list of in-demand qualifications. Over the years, the number of 457 entrants has steadily expanded to 125,070 visa grants in 2011–12 (Hugo 2013) and now exceeds the number of migrants who enter annually as permanent settlers in the skilled migration category (‘Key facts about immigration’ 2013). 457 visa holders predominantly originate from the UK, India, Ireland, the Philippines, the USA, and China. The temporary visa is limited to four years, with the possibility of an extension if the work contract is renewed. Subject to certain conditions being met, temporary visa holders can also apply to have their status converted to permanent residents.

Theoretically, the scheme is restricted to highly-skilled workers in industries where there is a demonstrated skills shortage. In practice, up to 40 percent of entrants under the scheme may be unskilled or possess skills for which there is no shortage, because the scheme allows for the entrance of primary visa holders (the skilled worker) and their spouses and dependents as secondary visa holders. The 2011–12 intake of 125,070 temporary skilled migrants, for instance, consisted of 68,310 primary 457 visa holders and 56,760 secondary 457 visa holders (Hugo 2013).

Furthermore, the 457 visa scheme is legally highly complex, details change frequently, and the Australian public does not normally have ready access to the policy as a whole, as D’Mello (2009) points out. The 457 scheme consists of eight sub-streams, and the one that is particularly relevant for our enquiry is the ‘labor agreement stream.’ The labor agreement stream is used in the meat
industry and basically involves bulk-recruitment from a particular country of origin (Jockel 2009).

Linguistically, recruitment under the labor agreement stream has two consequences: first, the English language requirements of the 457 visa are relaxed or even waived for this particular stream. Second, relatively large cohorts of speakers of a particular language other than English end up in a particular workplace.

The temporary skilled migration scheme has been controversial since its inception. Public concern has been focused on the scheme’s potential for exploitation of migrant workers as well as for its potential of undercutting awards through the import of ‘cheap labor’ (Caspersz 2009; Williams 2007). 457 visa holders are an immensely diverse group, and proponents of the scheme usually point to highly-paid visa holders in professional and managerial positions, often from core English speaking countries, as evidence of the success of the scheme and the value it adds to the Australian economy by linking it to other advanced economies (e.g., Khoo, McDonald & Hugo 2005). By contrast, skeptics focus on trade workers in agriculture and mining, usually from non-English-speaking backgrounds who are employed to work in rural and remote Australia. These have repeatedly been found to be highly vulnerable to predatory employers and migration agencies (e.g., Caspersz 2009; Williams 2007). It is the latter group whose experiences are at the heart of our analysis.

A 2008 government report on the integrity of the 457 scheme noted that the scheme was indeed open to abuse and highlighted in particular the vulnerability to exploitation of entrants under the scheme without sufficient English language proficiency (Deegan 2008). English language requirements under the scheme have since been tightened, but entrants under the labor agreement stream as well as contract renewals of entrants prior to the institution of the tightened English language requirement continue to be exempt. However, in order for temporary visa holders to change their visa status to permanent residence, there is a stringent English language requirement; an issue that affected all our participants, as we will explain below.

### 3 Big Beef in Tiny Town

Having been sustainably inhabited by indigenous people for tens of thousands of years prior to colonization, Tiny Town and its surrounding district has seen a number of boom-and-bust cycles in its short history since, and capitalist violence has become inscribed in the landscape in a typical Australian badland
The first squatter from Scotland established a sheep station in the mid-19th century. Following a massacre of Aboriginal people and the dispersal of survivors, the district was soon cleared for a timber boom. At the turn of the century, a British-born merchant acquired the timber concession for the district. His sawmill, which was only one of many in a timber empire spread across Australia and Papua New Guinea, attracted timber cutters and mill workers from Australian cities as well as new migrants from the UK and Ireland. With the rising fortunes of the sawmill, Tiny Town expanded rapidly only to collapse when the district’s timber resources had become depleted by the 1930s. For most of the second half of the 20th century, Tiny Town lost inhabitants, particularly as the timber bust was followed by dairy deregulation, which meant that small family farms became unviable from the 1960s onwards.

Big Beef was established around that time as a family enterprise by a local pastoralist and initially only supplied regional butchers. For many years, it remained a medium-sized enterprise slaughtering around 40 head of cattle per day for the regional market. This changed in the late 1990s when Big Beef started to produce exclusively for the Japanese market. Slaughtering capacity was increased to around 800 head of cattle per day. In 2012, Big Beef continued to operate at this slaughtering capacity. It continues to produce exclusively for export but has diversified its markets beyond Japan to China, Russia, and South Korea. Big Beef shares have been traded on the stock market since the 1990s, and in 2012 an 80 percent share in the company was owned by a Hong Kong-based hedge fund investing ‘in everything from closed-end country funds trading at deep discounts and non-tradable Chinese C shares to asset-backed loans and distressed debt’ (Stokes 2009).

The fortunes of Big Beef are thus deeply enmeshed with global markets, be it patterns of meat consumption in faraway countries or the free-floating finance streams that seem to lack all territoriality. Since its integration into the capitalist world system a little over a century ago, Tiny Town has also been the destination of mobile workers attempting to build lives in places far away from their places of origin. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data from the 2011 census (2011 census quick stats 2012), in 2011 Tiny Town had 1,700 inhabitants. Only 50 of these (3 percent) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. 1,300 inhabitants (75 percent) are Australia-born, predominantly of ‘Australian’ (self-identified and usually meaning Anglo-Celtic), British, Irish, and German heritage. In this make-up, Tiny Town is fairly typical of Australia, where in 2011 2 percent were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent and just under 70 percent of the population were Australia-born.

However, there are two aspects of its demography that make Tiny Town stand out from the rest of Australia: one is the proportion of people who speak
English at home and the other is the proportion of inhabitants born in the Philippines. 82 percent of Tiny Towners speak English at home, 6 percent more than the national average and 12 percent more than in urban Australia. 7.5 percent (130) of Tiny Town residents were born in the Philippines, compared to 0.8 percent in Australia as a whole.

The relatively high number of residents from the Philippines in Tiny Town is due to the recruitment efforts of Big Beef in that country. Big Beef is not only the main employer in town, but the entire economy of Tiny Town is dependent on the fortunes of Big Beef. On its website, Big Beef claims to employ 750 local people. According to ABS census data, 215 Tiny Towners were employed in meat production. Thus, it is not only Tiny Town that depends on Big Beef but also the surrounding district and neighboring towns.

In what follows we will concentrate on the employment and settlement experiences of the Filipinas and Filipinos Big Beef has brought to Tiny Town.

4 Participants

In May 2009, Loy Lising spent a week in Tiny Town to conduct fieldwork for a larger study investigating the intersection between language and employment and settlement in the experiences of skilled migrants from the Philippines to Australia. The researcher, who is originally from the Philippines and speaks Tagalog, spent the week as the house guest of a Filipina Tiny Town resident. This connection, through whom entry into the community was achieved, is not a temporary skilled migrant but came to Tiny Town with her Australian husband in 2001. During the week, Loy Lising participated in a range of daily community activities and informally interviewed a range of Filipino and non-Filipino residents. The analysis presented here rests on these participant observation data as well as formal interviews with six temporary work visa holders who worked for Big Beef.

The six focal participants consist of three primary 457 visa holders and three secondary 457 visa holders. The three primary visa holders are male, and the three secondary visa holders are female. The following offers a brief profile of each.

Torre moved from Manila to Tiny Town in 2006 when he was offered a contract as a slicer for Big Beef. Prior to coming to Australia, he had worked as a butcher in a Manila wet market. Torre has completed high school. He is married and, at the time of the interview, his wife resided in the Philippines to care for their newborn baby. Torre was hoping that his wife would join him as soon as their baby was old enough to be left with his wife’s parents.
Don moved from Manila to Tiny Town in 2006, when he was offered a contract as a boner for Big Beef. Prior to coming to Australia, he had worked as a butcher at a Manila meat processing plant. After completing high school, Don had undertaken further vocational studies in electronics but fell six months short of completing the two-year course when he could no longer afford the tuition. He is married and has a seven-year old daughter. Both his wife and child resided in the Philippines at the time of the interview, and Don did not want to move them to Australia until and unless he achieved permanent residency status.

Rob moved from Manila to Tiny Town in 2006, when he was offered a contract as a slicer for Big Beef. Prior to coming to Australia, he was unemployed but had butchering experience. Rob has completed high school. He is married to Annie, another focal participant. They have three young children aged between two and eleven at the time of the interview, who reside in the Philippines in the care of relatives. Rob and Annie wish they could have their children with them in Tiny Town but feel it would be imprudent to move them as long as their visa status is temporary.

Annie, Rob’s wife, joined her husband in Tiny Town in 2008. She works as a packer for Big Beef. Prior to coming to Australia, Annie was the full-time carer for her three children, who she misses very much. Annie has completed high school but has no education or training beyond that.

Rosie, who also worked as a packer, joined her husband in 2008. Prior to coming to Australia, Rosie was the full-time carer for her two children, who were aged ten and twelve at the time of the interview. She, too, had left her children behind in the Philippines in the care of relatives and longed to be reunited with them. For her, too, bringing her children to Tiny Town depended on her long-term prospects in Australia. Rosie has completed high school but has no education or training beyond that due to her family’s poverty.

Ellen also worked as a packer and also joined her husband in 2008; her husband had been hired in 2006. Prior to coming to Australia, Ellen was the full-time carer for her two children, who were aged six and ten at the time of the interview. She, too, had left her children behind in the Philippines in the care of relatives. Unlike the other focal participants, Ellen had completed a vocational degree in Hotel and Restaurant Management after high school.

5 Language in recruitment

Since the 1970s, the Philippine state has pursued a labor export strategy, and the Philippines are often considered the prototypical supplier of a global work-
force (Simpson 2012). In 2006, when the primary 457 visa holders in this study were recruited, over one million Filipinas and Filipinos left the country in order to take up work contracts in 179 different countries (Barber 2008). The most recent cohort of workers from the Philippines consists predominantly of well-educated females with high levels of English language proficiency who take up contracts in global consumer services (Barber 2008). Our participants are atypical to that cohort on a number of counts: the primary visa holders are male, they are all poorly educated, and, most crucially for our inquiry, their levels of English proficiency are low.

The colonial legacy of a workforce educated in English (Bernardo 2004) is widely described as one of the key competitive advantages that workers from the Philippines enjoy over other Asian workers in the global labor market (Barber 2008; Simpson 2012). While our participants, too, had received English language instruction in the course of their primary and secondary schooling, the fact that, with the exception of Ellen, they only completed compulsory education means that their levels of English were relatively low. While English language skills were obviously irrelevant to their butchering abilities, they were highly relevant to their ability (or lack of ability) to convert their temporary visa status into a more permanent status.

Unlike interactive service work, which always involves a component of language work (Heller 2010; Piller & Takahashi 2013), meatwork does not involve any language; indeed, as we will show below, talk at work is actively discouraged (see Boutet 2008 for language in factory work more generally). Therefore, it is not surprising that English language proficiency was irrelevant in the recruitment process.

Big Beef has been recruiting in Manila since 2005 and Torre, Don, and Rob arrived in early 2006 as part of the first cohort of temporary skilled meat workers recruited from Manila. Big Beef has since had additional recruitment drives in the Philippines and, more recently, also in China. This recruitment strategy aimed at groups of temporary workers from a specific country of origin hired in batches is tied to the legal framework of the labor agreement under which recruitment takes place and is typical in the meat processing industry, as Winning (2009) found with Brazilians and Tetteh (forthcoming) with Chinese workers working for other Australian meat packers. Meat packers have also been targeting refugees and asylum seekers (Stilwell & Grealis 2003). However, the 457 visa scheme is much more effective in supplying groups of workers in the numbers required in the industry.

In late 2005, a recruiter for Big Beef visited Manila and observed butchers at work in various meat processing plants and wet markets. Don described the observation as a ’trade test’:
Don: *Yong employer namin pina-trade test kami doon.*

‘We were asked by the employer to do a trade test.’

Loy: *Ano yong trade test?*

‘What is a trade test?’


‘It’s where you debone a hanging carcass. You do the actual slicing. You debone the carcass. He will ascertain if you are good with the knife. If he can see that you are a skilled butcher, then your name gets ticked off from the list and you will be asked to report to the recruitment agency the next day for an interview.’

The interview with the recruitment agency was not a further aspect of the selection process but served to inform prospective workers of the conditions of their employment. The recruitment agency was staffed by Filipinos, who translated between the prospective worker and the Australian recruiter. Asked whether the interview also served to ascertain if they could speak English well, Don, Torre, and Rob were unanimous that their English did not matter. What mattered in getting the desirable contract to work in Australia was their knife skills; skills in which they took great pride.

All paperwork involved in issuing the contract and organizing relocation from Manila to Tiny Town was undertaken by the Philippine recruitment agency. The workers only had to submit the necessary documents such as passports, birth, and health certificates. For the services of the recruitment agency, the workers had to pay a ‘placement fee’ of around 135,000 pesos. 35,000 pesos had to be paid upfront by the applicant and the remaining 100,000 were paid through salary deductions over a two-year period. The placement fee covered visa processing and airfare. Under the terms of the 457 visa scheme, the sponsoring employer is liable for the airfare of secondary visa holders as well as the cost of return travel to the country of origin after the end of the contract (‘Strengthening the integrity of the 457 program’ 2012).

For all participants, the chance to work in Australia presented a huge economic opportunity, as Don explained:

Loy: *Apart from klaro sa isip mo iyong trabaho mo dito, wala ka bang tanong sa isip mo tungkol sa pamumuhay dito?*
‘While it was clear in your mind what the work here entailed, did you ever wonder what it would be like to live here?’


‘Not really. I just thought here’s an opportunity to earn money. <laughs> And they said the wage will be good. So, I just said to myself, whatever it is I end up with will be fine with me. ... In Manila, my net pay was 3,000 pesos for 15-days’ worth of work. While here you end up with around 120,000 pesos a month. For a week of work here I earn 1,000 dollars.’

While low by Australian standards, hourly wages of between $17.25 (for a packer) and $19.10 (for a boner) constituted an immense improvement over their previous earning capacity.

In sum, English language proficiency was not a recruitment criterion, and participants only had very limited English when they left Manila. However, they expected that, once in Australia, their English would improve quickly. In the following two sections we will therefore explore how they fared once they arrived in Tiny Town.

6 Multilingualism at work

Work in a meat processing plant is organized in a conveyor-belt system in five different sections. Cattle come in to the kill floor, and the carcasses are then moved to the cutting down section. Progressive smaller pieces of meat are then conveyed first to the boning section (where Don worked) and from there to the slicing section (where Torre and Rob worked). Eventually, the meat is packed in the packing section, where the unskilled female secondary visa holders worked.

The conveyor-belt system dictates the speed at which a worker needs to complete their task and work speed is outside an individual worker’s control. Talk during work could mean that a worker might fall behind in their task and thus hold up the whole process. Consequently, talk during work is discouraged.
All the participants reported that the speed and physically demanding nature of their work left virtually no scope for talk during work. Ellen provides an example:

(3) Loy: Why is it hard?
Ellen: Standing up ten hours a day. Standing and then of course we’re packers so we’re going to catch up the slicers, so the slicers will what they are slice, we pack it and then because of the speed, very, very-
Loy: Fast?
Ellen: Fast, so it’s a hard time to us.

Despite these tight constraints on communication during work, conversations, of course, do occur in the workplace. In addition to short conversations that might be necessary during work, breaks and shift changes provided the main opportunities for communication. Given the large numbers of workers from the Philippines, there were shifts and/or sections that were exclusively staffed by Filipinos or where they constituted the majority. In such contexts, it was natural for them to speak to each other in Tagalog (see also Angouri & Miglbauer, this issue). However, when overheard by Australian workers, they were often reprimanded for using Tagalog, similar to the ways in which the use of Japanese among Japanese co-workers was policed by Australian co-workers in another Australian workplace, a low-cost airline (Piller & Takahashi 2013). Don describes such negative reactions by Australian co-workers to the use of Tagalog at work:

(4) Loy: So do you guys make an effort na nag-i-English kayo para hindi naman feeling excluded.
‘So do you guys make an effort to speak in English so they don’t feel excluded?’
‘Yes, we try to speak English even when there are only Filipinos around because when we speak in Tagalog and the Australians overhear us, they would shout at us. Speak English! So we speak English.’
Loy: And then what do you say when they yell at you?
Don: Ah sorry, sorry, sabi kong ganoon. Eh, nagsalita kami nga English, eh, nagsalita kami.
‘We say, ah, sorry, sorry. And then we switch to English.’
Incidents such as these placed additional stresses on participants, who mostly felt confused about the use of Tagalog. None of them questioned the right of Australians to demand that they speak English even when only talking amongst themselves. Some even felt under an obligation to speak English so as not to cause discomfort to others:

(5) Ellen: One of my supervisor told me, Ellen, I don’t like to hear Tagalog. ... That’s why I told also my co-Filipinos if there is an Australian beside us, let’s talk English.

At the same time, participants felt breaks were their own time and they should be able to relax in whichever way they thought fit. Most of them reported enjoying hanging out with other Filipinos during break time and joking around in Tagalog. Others rested by avoiding communication altogether, such as Annie:

(6) Loy: What do you do during breaktime?
‘When it is our break time we eat and then have some rest. Sometimes I want to be by myself and rest my back against a tree.’

In addition to communication during work and during breaks, the only other communication opportunity in the workplace arose during staff meetings and any communication with management. Such occasions were extremely rare, and, in contrast to co-workers who insisted on the use of English, management were willing to accommodate workers’ linguistic preferences. They did so by installing a Filipino go-between who was tasked with liaising between Filipino workers and management. Torre explained the arrangement as follows:

(7) Loy: And then anong-dito anong position niya?
‘So what is his (i.e. the go-between’s) role exactly?’
Torre: Bale siya iyong tumatayo sa aming leader.
‘He acts as our leader.’
Loy: Supervisor niyo, no?
‘He is your supervisor?’
Torre: Hindi naman supervisor, basta siya lang iyong leader namin. Parang... So pag may problema kami sa kom- hindi kasi required siya, pag may problema sa company, kung meron kaming dapat sabihin sa kanya muna sinasabi.
‘No, not a supervisor, just a leader. Like- ... So, if we have any problems with the company, if there was something we need to say, we need to speak with him first.’

Don explained the nature of these communications further by giving an example:

(8) Don:  
Ganyan pag- pagka ano iyon, mag-conduct sila ng ganun, papatawag si Boss -supervisor ng meeting na, dyan sa ano, sa bahay, ng mga Pinoy, nagpatawag na, tapos sasabihin halimbawa na na ano, na linisin iyong mga bota kasi may mag inspection nga.  
‘For instance, when there is an inspection, the Filipino leader would call a meeting in his house for the Filipino workers. And then he would say there will be an inspection so you need to clean your work boots.’

In sum, verbal communication plays a limited role on Big Beef’s conveyor belts. The limited communication that is necessary to work as boner, slicer, or packer and the communication that occurs during breaks and with management is predominantly in Tagalog because of the numerical predominance of Tagalog speakers. Management accommodates to workers’ preference for Tagalog and their limited proficiency in English through the institution of a linguistic mediator. However, Australian co-workers are more apt to insist on the use of English and to admonish Filipino workers for their use of Tagalog. Overall, opportunities to practice English were severely constrained.

7 English in the community

While opportunities to use English at work were limited, there was an expectation that Filipinos would practice English during their non-work time and that it would thus be easy for them to improve their English through immersion in the community. For instance, Ken, an Australian resident of Tiny Town, argued that the Filipino workers should mingle more:

(9) Ken:  
There are obviously language problems but if you’re going to come over as a group of however many in a house with that group, then you’re not exposing yourself too much to English. I understand they even subscribe to Filipino television channels
and this sort of thing. They’re not going to learn if they don’t make themselves learn. No one’s going to teach them; they’ve got to teach themselves. ... I think they should- I’m sure they would be welcomed by most members of the community because country people are very friendly, much more so than in the city. ... But I think from the point of view of mixing with the community, I don’t know if any of them, for example, go to the local churches, which is always a good place to meet members of the community. I don’t know whether the blokes go and have a beer in the pub in town, which is another way to mix. I also don’t know whether any of them have European workmates that they mix with outside work.

However, mingling in the community and practicing English outside work was not as easy as Ken made it sound. To begin with, the demands of shift-work severely constrain opportunities to use English outside work. Workers at Big Beef are either assigned to the day shift or the night shift. The day shift involves working from 5 am to 4 pm on four consecutive days followed by three rostered days off. The night shift involves working from 4 pm to midnight on five consecutive days followed by two rostered days off. Both shifts are obviously highly onerous and leave workers with little time for anything other than the reproduction of their physical fitness.

All participants were deeply religious, and when asked about what they missed about life in the Philippines they would state that it was attending church with their families. However, they found attending church in Tiny Town difficult for various reasons. In addition to the distance, they explained that their shift work usually precluded church attendance. Even if the Sunday happened to be their rostered day off, they were too tired and needed to sleep in order to recuperate.

Filipino workers typically share accommodation. Annie and Rob, for instance, shared a rented house with another Filipino couple. The pattern of two couples to a house was typical for all the couples in the study. The single men live in shared houses with five or six Filipinos each. The median weekly rent for a free-standing three-to-four bedroom house in Tiny Town is $270 (2011 census quick stats 2012) and participants reported paying above average rents of between $360 and $400. Sharing meant that the cost of accommodation was defrayed to about $80–90 per person per week.

In addition to helping with the cost of accommodation, sharing with other Filipinos was also a way to deal with feelings of loneliness and homesickness. All the participants reported that they found chatting, sharing stories, and jok-
ing in Tagalog relaxing. Living together also made subscription to the Manila-based satellite TV station *The Filipino Channel* more affordable. *The Filipino Channel*, which promotes itself with the slogan ‘In the Service of the Filipino Worldwide’ (‘ABS CBN Global’ n.d.), was a key means to make participants feel connected with home and to provide them with a sense of belonging, as Annie explains:

(10) **Loy:** *Pero may napansin ako may Filipino channel din kayo ah.*
    ‘I noticed that you also subscribe to the Filipino Channel.’

    **Annie:** *Meron. TFC. <laughs>* *Para ba hindi malulungkot. Makikita mo iyong ano, kung angong nangyayari sa atin. Kasi syempre kami parang bago palang kami nag-adjust pa kami.*
    ‘Yes, we do. TFC. <laughs> So that we don’t feel homesick. You get to see what’s happening back home. We need it as we are still adjusting to living here.’

When going shopping and engaging in other public activities, doing so together with other Filipinos was sometimes important to provide a sense of security, given their low levels of English proficiency:

(11) **Annie:** *Ay lumalabas din kami sa town centre, ganyan pumupunta kami, pero sama-sama rin kami mga Pinoy lahat. Syempre kung hindi alam ng isa, magtatanong iyong isa sa isa, parang ganoon, nag-aanuhan kami.*
    ‘We go out to the town center. But we do that as a group. This way, if one does not understand something, we can easily help each other.’

    **Loy:** *Kayo ba ay, pinaplanon ninyong magsasama dahil gusto ninyong magkasama kayo dahil magkaibigan kayo o para may tulungan kayo pag sa Ingles?*  
    ‘Do you go out together because you are close friends or more so you can help each other understand English?’

    **Annie:** *Parang tulungan siguro parang ganoon. Kung hindi mo naintindi-han, sa akin kasi mas palatanong ako eh.*
    ‘I think more so we can help each other. So if there is something you don’t understand. Personally, I ask questions a lot.’

In sum, participants led lives that were focused on work, and even their personal time was closely circumscribed by the demands of heavy physical work, long shifts, and the exhaustion they result in. In this context, sticking with
other Filipinos met a number of important needs: in addition to saving money, it also offered a sense of relaxation, belonging, and security. This conspired to make interactions in English a rarity. When asked about when he had occasion to speak English, Don, for instance, took a while to come up with this example:

(12) Loy: During the day or sa weekend, saan mo kailangan sa tingin mo na magsalita ka in English?
   ‘During the day or on weekends, where else do you think you need to speak in English?’

   ‘Sometimes in the grocery store. Of course you need to approach the cashier and ask things like, where is your rice? Where is your Asian food section? Sometimes I don’t get to find what I am looking for so I need to ask.’

One way to practice English was to speak English with other Filipinos. Among the participants, Ellen stood out by her determination to practice English. She reported that she had agreed with her husband to speak English, and she also reported insisting, with various levels of success, that Filipinos speak English with each other, as in the example quoted above. Indeed, Ellen also conducted the interview with the researcher entirely in English and was the only participant who reported having Australian friends:

(13) Loy: So apart from your husband, who else do you speak with in English in the community?
   Ellen: My friend. I had some friends there in Red Cross.
   Loy: What are they?
   Ellen: Australian also. Staff. Staff.
   Loy: And how often do you get to talk to them?
   Ellen: Always because that is the store of the second-hand.

While Ellen stands out for her determination to speak English instead of Tagalog, all the participants were fully aware that they needed to improve their English, even if they could not figure out how.
8 English for settlement

While English had been irrelevant to the participants’ recruitment and relocation to Australia and while English only played a minor role in their ability to work and to live in the community, English was crucial for the participants’ future. As we pointed out above, all the participants had spouses and/or children who they had left behind in the Philippines and who they longed to be reunited with. All of them dreamt of extending their contracts beyond the initial four-year period and of settling permanently in Australia with their families. Their ability to plan for the future and to settle in Australia depended on their English language proficiency. After one of many reforms of the 457 visa scheme, in 2009, contract extension was dependent on achieving a score of 4.5 or above on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and permanent residency required a score of 5.0 or above. The former was set to change in July 2013, and contract renewal under the labor agreement stream is no longer contingent upon a specific English language score (‘Strengthening the integrity of the 457 program’ 2012). As a matter of fact, it is unclear to us whether it has ever really been a legal requirement in the labor agreement stream. The legislation is highly complex and can be opaque to a non-lawyer (D’Mello 2009). Whatever the precise legal requirement may have been, the participants and their employer were clearly under the impression that contract extension depended on achieving a score of 4.5 or higher on the IELTS.

Table 1 lists the IELTS scores achieved by the participants and the year in which they had taken the test. As secondary visa holders, the women’s IELTS scores were technically irrelevant, but the fact that they had all taken the test at least once demonstrates how important the test and its outcome are for their ability to plan their futures. The IELTS band score descriptors applying to our participants are ‘intermittent user’ (2; Annie), ‘extremely limited user’ (3; Rob), ‘limited user’ (4; Don) and ‘modest user’ (5; Torre, Rosie and Ellen).

Table 1: Participants’ IELTS scores.

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>IELTS score</th>
<th>Date of IELTS test</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Torre</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>3/3.5</td>
<td>2008/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The low proficiency levels of the group can be explained with their limited education. Those with relatively high levels of proficiency for the group, even if only ‘modest’ by technical standards, had a greater level of education, as Ellen, who held a hospital degree, and Torre, who had undertaken an electronics degree, did. Ellen herself explained her relatively high proficiency level with her determination and her willingness to speak and to take every opportunity to practice the language. Rosie spoke about her religious affiliations when she explained her English language achievements as she had been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Manila, where the congregation frequently received visitors from the USA.

Given their low proficiency levels, having to study for the IELTS test and having its outcome determine their fate was highly stressful for participants. Further stress was added by the fact that the requirement kept changing and that even Big Beef management seemed unsure what the requirements were (see above). For instance, Rob reported that in 2008 the company had announced it would have to release those who could not achieve an IELTS score of 4 or above prematurely from their contracts. While this did not happen eventually, Rob in particular felt the IELTS test hang over him like the proverbial sword of Damocles. At the time of the interview, Rob had sat the test twice with only a moderate score gain of 0.5 between 2008 and 2009. He described his experience of the test as follows:

(14) Rob: Nag-aral din ako pero kaya lang talagang kung minsan blanko yong pag-iisip ko. Iyong huling anon a ito wala kasi akong tulog. ‘I did try and study but my mind just goes blank. In the most recent test I sat in, I didn't have any sleep.'

Big Beef, too, had an interest in supporting Filipino workers to study for the test and to achieve the required score, as it would mean the retention of these workers in an environment plagued by labor shortages and absenteeism, as we explained in the introduction. Consequently, they offered free English language classes during the workers' own time, and they also paid the IELTS test fee of around $250 per test. For the workers, this was a sign of Big Beef actually caring about them. Failure to live up to the company's perceived care could thus cause them acute embarrassment:

(15) Rob: Sa isip ko rin, eh, ganun na rin gagawin ko, eh. Dahil sabi ko, at saka ako na rin gagastos dahil nakakahiya na sa kompaniya na dalawang beses na akong ginastosan na- Kasi noong una pa lang, nong bumagsak ako doon sa Pilipinas, nagtapat na ako a kanila,

‘In my mind, this is what I plan to do. I told them I am going to pay for my lessons and the test because it is becoming quite embarrassing to the company that they have paid for me twice already. The first time I failed, I spoke to them and said that I didn’t want to take the test anymore because it is a waste of money for the company. I was thinking they will just waste their money because I was going to fail again. But now I am thinking I am going to take the test but I will pay for it myself as I am beginning to feel embarrassed.’

In sum, building lives in Australia depended upon a language test score and was entirely disconnected from their work and the contributions they made to Big Beef, Tiny Town, and the Australian economy more broadly. As Steve, an Australian knife sharpener at Big Beef, said about the Filipinos in town:

(16) Steve: Well they’re good for the town really. It’s brought plenty of work and they’re bringing plenty of money to the place. They’re spending money here. It’s good for the town. I think the town people are happy. They’ve got to be.

Considering their obvious contribution as workers and residents, the bureaucratic focus on their IELTS score seems irrational. Indeed, it is not surprising that the participants largely felt that their IELTS score and hence their fate was outside their control, in the hand of God:

(17) Loy: Sa future, ano sa tinging mo, dito kayo maninirahan ng pamilya mo?

‘In the future, do you think you will live here with your family?’

Rob: Kung maawa, himala, kung magbigay ng ano, siyempre, kung bigay ng Diyos sa akin, eh, himala yon. Napakalaking pag-asa pero kung wala ...

‘If God looks upon me kindly. Miracle. If God gives it to us, then that would be a miracle. I only have great hope but if not ...’
9 Conclusion

In this article we have shown that meat workers who do not have high levels of English language proficiency before coming to Australia have few opportunities to acquire English at work or in the community. Indeed, the management and the rigors of their work mitigate against their English language learning and privilege the continued use of their national language. It would thus seem that the imposition of English language proficiency requirements for visa extensions and for permanent residency serves to secure the permanent contingency of a sector of the agricultural work force. In a neoliberal global order where the value of agricultural exports and the unemployment rate are fluctuating unpredictably, English language proficiency requirements have thus become a politically acceptable way to ensure a ‘flexible’ labor supply.

The workers we interviewed for this study are little cogs in the global machine of neoliberal capitalism. They were brought to Australia to work for the benefits of Big Beef and the Australian economy. Both their employer and the state treat them entirely as workers rather than as human beings. Valuing a person solely for their knife skills and their ability to pack meat is widely considered immoral, and most Australians would consider such a narrow view of human beings abhorrent. Why is it accepted then? In addition to simple ignorance about the lives of agricultural workers, it is a language ideology that makes these conditions palatable to the public: a language ideology that insists that Australia is English-speaking and in order to be of value to the nation you have to speak English. The whole complex of “speaking English” is then reduced to a single score on a test, which is used to determine the worth of a person: with an IELTS score of 4.0 or below you are nothing more than a ‘warm body’ – the derogatory term that has become customary for low-skilled group recruits in the UK staffing industry (McDowell 2009). With an IELTS score of 4.5 or above you may be eligible for ‘extras’ such as a family life.

Bionotes

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References


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