



“Shimenet” as Shibboleth: Linguistic Performance in Philippine Social Media

Dan Henry F. Gonzales^{a1*}

^a Department of English, Ateneo de Manila University, Loyola Heights Campus, Manila, Philippines.

Abstract

This paper investigates the viral “Shimenet” meme that emerged from Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte’s mispronunciation of “she may not” during the 2025 proposed budget deliberation for her office. Utilizing Andrew Moody’s framework on performative Englishes and Jamie Shinhee Lee’s framework on conflict talk, the study explores how pronunciation functions as a symbolic marker of inclusion and exclusion in online discourse. Drawing from a Reddit discussion thread about a Filipino professor’s commentary on the “Shimenet” fiasco, the research analyzes how digital narratives construct perceived insider–outsider dynamics through linguistic performance and humour, paralleling the biblical concept of the *shibboleth*. Although these dynamics may not fully mirror actual social divisions due to the complexities of digital interactions, they gain prominence in online spaces, influencing negotiations of identity and power. Through qualitative discourse analysis of Reddit comments, the study emphasises the significance of humour and conflict in shaping public perceptions, offering insights for more thoughtful engagement with online discourse and contributing to a broader understanding of language in social identity formation in postcolonial contexts.



Article info

Received 10 February 2025
Accepted 21 March 2025
Published 22 April 2025

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Advertisements, Gender Ideology, Media Discourse, Weight Loss, Skincare.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the digital landscape in the Philippines has witnessed the rapid emergence of memes that encapsulate complex social and linguistic dynamics (De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021; Calimbo, 2016). One striking example is the viral rise of “Shimenet,” a term born out of Vice President Sara Duterte’s mispronunciation during an August 2024 congressional budget hearing. What initially appeared as a mere linguistic gaffe quickly evolved into a potent cultural symbol—a shibboleth—fueling widespread debates on language, identity, and power in the digital sphere (Escudero, 2024; Pinugu, 2024).

The viral rise of “Shimenet” in the Philippines exemplifies how a seemingly minor linguistic quirk can ignite nationwide discourse on language, identity, and power. The term *shimenet* emerged from an August 2024 congressional budget hearing in which Vice President Sara Duterte’s pronunciation of the phrase “she may not” sounded like “shimenet.” Within days, this mispronunciation became an online meme (Escudero, 2024) and a cultural flashpoint: a *shibboleth* of sorts. In socio-historical terms, a *shibboleth* is a word or pronunciation used to distinguish in-groups from out-groups, often with gatekeeping or stigmatizing effects. The *shimenet* meme tapped into this dynamic: what many saw as a humorous gaffe also invoked long-running debates about linguistic prejudice in the Philippines.

^{1*} Corresponding author, ✉ dgonzales@ateneo.edu  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1071-4856>

Cite this Article: Gonzales, D. H. F. (2025). “Shimenet” as Shibboleth: Linguistic Performance in Philippine Social Media. *Journal of Discourse Review*, 1(1), 65-74.

Language in the Philippines carries deep social significance. English and Tagalog spoken in urban areas, particularly with a Manila accent, often enjoy prestige, whereas English spoken with a strong regional Visayan accent may be stigmatized as "low-class" or comical (Porras, 2022). Such accent judgments are socially learned rather than inherent (Lippi-Green, 1997), reflecting historical hierarchies. Vice President Duterte's *shiminet* instantly signaled to many listeners that she speaks English with a heavy Bisaya (Visayan) accent, marking her as outside the traditional Manila elite norm. In effect, *shiminet* became a trigger point for Filipinos to project broader social frustrations: some perceived it as evidence of a lack of sophistication, while others defended it as an unfair attack on regional identity.

Social media amplified this debate. What started as a clip from a government hearing quickly morphed into a viral meme (Pinugu, 2024) across platforms like TikTok, Twitter/X, and Reddit. Remix videos and posts repeated "shiminet" in comedic sketches, and discussions erupted over whether the ridicule was about a funny sound or a proxy for elitism. A notable response came from educator Ricky Rosales, who cautioned that mocking Duterte's accent was "medyo delikado" (somewhat dangerous) as it shifts focus away from substantive issues and might rally sympathy for her. Fig-1 shows Rosales's Facebook post, which was widely shared by limpinkark (2024) on Reddit. In his post, he argues in Filipino that while accent-based ridicule entertains the public, it distracts from larger problems (like missing public funds) and enables the Vice President to gain pity by casting herself as the "mocked underdog." Rosales urges Filipinos to refocus on accountability and warns that persistent laughter at *shiminet* could backfire by making Duterte's critics look elitist or cruel. This perspective reframed the meme as more than harmless fun, raising the question of whether *shiminet* was functioning as a divisive linguistic boundary marker.

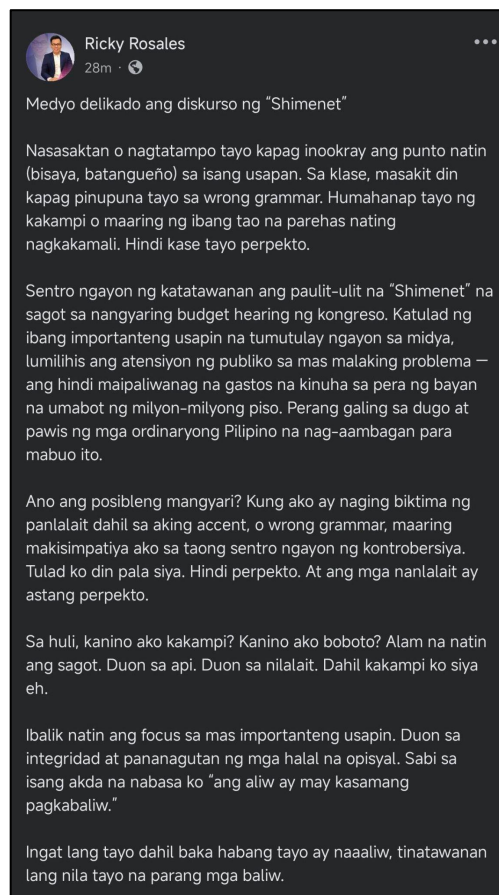


Fig-1: Screenshot of Ricky Rosales's Facebook Post Cautioning Against the "Shiminet" Discourse

Rosales notes that Filipinos feel hurt when their accent (e.g., Bisaya, Batangueño) is mocked, and warns that the repeated laughter over "Shiminet" distracts from more important issues (like unexplained public expenditures) and may even generate sympathy for the "mocked" official. He urges refocusing on accountability rather than accent-based ridicule. In light of this controversy, this study asks: How does the "Shiminet" meme serve as a symbolic marker of inclusion and exclusion in online discourse, and what do Reddit-based reactions reveal about performative language use and conflict talk in the Philippine digital sphere? By examining a Reddit thread where

netizens debated the merits and meaning of *shimenet*, the study aims to illuminate how linguistic performance and conflict intersect in a postcolonial social media context. In what follows, the theoretical lenses of performative Englishes and conflict talk are outlined, before turning to the methodology and an analysis of the Reddit discourse. The significance of this topic lies in what it reveals about digital linguistic gatekeeping and sociolinguistic identity: online communities are not just laughing at a meme, they are actively negotiating who “speaks correctly” and who belongs or is excluded in the imagined national conversation. Understanding these dynamics can deepen our understanding of language-based power play in new media and postcolonial society.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Performative Englishes in Popular Culture

Andrew Moody’s (2020) framework on performative Englishes offers a useful starting point for understanding how language becomes a form of performance in media and online discourse. Drawing on the World Englishes paradigm of Braj Kachru (1985), Moody explains that different societies strategically use English in popular culture to project certain identities and values. In postcolonial “Outer Circle” contexts like the Philippines, English carries both local authenticity and global authority, and speakers often *perform* English in ways that navigate this duality. For example, Philippine media and pop culture frequently feature code-switching and stylized English: a TV comedian might deliberately exaggerate a *conyo* (upper-middle-class youth in urban Manila) accent or a Visayan-inflected English to comedic effect, thereby performing social class through speech. Moody’s framework suggests that such uses of English are performative in that they do not merely communicate content, but also enact authenticity or authority.

In the case of *shimenet*, what started as an inadvertent mispronunciation was transformed by netizens into a performative catchphrase. Young people on TikTok and Twitter began mimicking “shimenet” in skits and remix videos (Pinugu, 2024), effectively performing a Visayan-accented English persona for humour. This aligns with Moody’s notion that English in popular culture becomes a stage on which speakers negotiate identity. The *shimenet* meme allowed users to play with linguistic style – switching into VP Duterte’s distinct pronunciation – as a form of social commentary and comedic performance. Notably, such performances hinge on shared norms about what counts as a “valid” or “funny” way of speaking English. In the Philippines, there is a tension between authority (using English in a “standard” Manila or American way associated with education or power) and authenticity (infusing English with local accent or slang for relatability). The *shimenet* phenomenon highlighted this tension. Duterte’s accented English was perceived by some as a lack of polish or proficiency, yet others reframed it as an authentic marker of provincial identity or even populist charm. Thus, Moody’s performative Englishes framework helps us see *shimenet* not just as a funny mispronunciation, but as a performance that different audiences evaluate through their own linguistic ideologies. Some engage in mockery to align with an in-group that values “proper” English, while others express solidarity or defense to align with an in-group that values accent inclusivity.

2.2. Conflict Talk and Digital Othering

Jamie Shinhee Lee’s (2020) framework of conflict talk provides another layer of analysis, especially for the contentious debates that followed the *shimenet* meme. Lee’s research on social media spats (for instance, conflicts on Instagram) shows how participants use language strategically to mark insiders versus outsiders. In online arguments, several recurring tactics of conflict talk have been identified: (1) referencing personal or cultural details of one’s opponent (often irrelevantly, to undercut them), (2) evoking stereotypes about the opponent’s group, and (3) using overt insults or transgressive language. These strategies construct an “us vs. them” dichotomy, typically through explicit disparagement and overgeneralization of the other. The goal is not just to disagree, but to another one’s interlocutor — to frame them as fundamentally different or inferior.

Applying Lee’s framework to the *shimenet* saga, we can see parallel patterns of linguistic othering. The meme spurred antagonistic exchanges between groups online: one side (largely anti-Duterte or Metro Manila-based commenters) mocked the Vice President’s accent as a shorthand for incompetence or ignorance, while the other side (Duterte’s supporters and some from Mindanao/Visayas) pushed back, accusing the mockers of elitism and regional discrimination. In these exchanges, classic conflict talk tactics emerged. Critics of Duterte’s *shimenet* often coupled the linguistic joke with broader insults – for example, referring to her as “Fiona” (a derogatory nickname likening her to an ogre character) or calling her “gago” (a Filipino insult meaning “stupid” or “jerk”). Such overtly offensive language cements in-group unity among the mockers at the expense of the target. On the other hand, Duterte’s defenders invoked stereotypes of the mockers, painting them as “Imperial Manila elitists”

who look down on Bisaya speakers. This evokes the classic center-periphery narrative in the Philippines, framing the controversy as Manileños vs. provincials and not merely Duterte vs. her critics.

Interestingly, conflict talk in this case sometimes led to strange bedfellows. Some anti-Duterte voices found themselves agreeing with the notion that accent-based ridicule is wrong — a stance also promoted by Duterte’s own allies. This reflects what Lee observed about how narratives can be co-opted by different sides: the same linguistic event (here, *shimenet*) was reframed in competing ways. One narrative cast the mockery as *punching up* at a powerful official who deserved scrutiny (focusing on her evasion and alleged corruption), while another narrative cast it as *punching down* at a marginalized linguistic group (focusing on Visayan identity and pride). The conflict talk framework illuminates how participants in the Reddit thread (and beyond) maneuvered these narratives by insulting, stereotype-casting, and even occasionally mitigating conflict. For instance, Lee notes that sometimes opponents engage in lexical mirroring to reduce tension (e.g., jokingly adopting each other’s phrases). In the *shimenet* thread, there were few signs of mirroring or peace-making – the dominant tone was combative – but a few users did attempt to bridge perspectives (as we will see, one user essentially said “I agree with Ricky” in urging caution despite being anti-Duterte). Overall, Lee’s framework helps us understand the *shimenet* debate as not just about a meme or an accent, but as a proxy battle over cultural hierarchy, waged through words.

Research on digital identity performance in the Philippines supports the notion that language is a dynamic tool for constructing and negotiating identity in online spaces. Jaucian (2023) demonstrates that Filipino vloggers strategically shift between exonormative and endonormative varieties of English—often mixing in Tagalog—to create authentic yet flexible online personas. This fluid use of language not only aligns with the broader trends observed in digital media but also mirrors the performative dynamics seen in the “Shimenet” meme. As with the meme, the vloggers’ language choices serve as symbolic markers that both include and exclude, reinforcing existing social hierarchies and inviting viewers to partake in a shared cultural narrative.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Selection

This study focuses on a single but significant Reddit discussion thread in the subreddit, r/Philippines, that encapsulated the public debate on *shimenet*. The thread, posted on August 30, 2024 by user limpipark, is titled “Professor Ricky Rosales on the ‘Shimenet’ fiasco.” It shared Professor Rosales’s Facebook post (see Figure 1) and invited Redditors to discuss his viewpoint. The thread quickly grew popular, garnering 404 upvotes and over 200 comments within a couple of days. For this analysis, approximately 180 top-level and reply comments (excluding a few deleted or system comments) were collected and qualitatively examined. The comments are in English, Filipino, or code-mixed “Taglish,” reflecting the translingual discourse of Filipino netizens. Given the manageable size of the thread and its rich content, all visible comments were reviewed, but particular analytical attention was given to the most upvoted comments and the most relevant replies that exemplified the key themes of interest (performative language use and conflict talk).

Several criteria guided the selection of example comments for analysis. Comments that received high scores (upvotes) were prioritized as they indicate sentiments that resonated widely with the community. Likewise, comments that directly addressed language, accent, or the meme itself were central to answering our research question, so we included both supportive and critical reactions to *shimenet*. I also ensured to capture a range of perspectives: from those doubling down on humour and ridicule, to those defending Duterte or cautioning against the meme’s effects. Very short comments or off-topic remarks were largely set aside, as were simple queries (e.g., “What is shimenet?”) once they had been answered, since our focus is on discourse and stance rather than information-seeking.

3.2. Rationale for Using Reddit

This study chooses to center the dataset on Reddit for a robust analysis. Unlike other social media apps such as Twitter/X, a Reddit thread represents a multi-party conversation: users are not limited to 280 characters and can engage in back-and-forth discussion, allowing us to observe dialogic interactions and argumentation strategies. Reddit’s forum-style structure enabled us to see how narratives form, clash, and evolve as people reply to one another. Moreover, the subreddit forum, r/Philippines, is a public community with diverse membership (in terms of region and political leanings), making it an ideal venue to witness a microcosm of the national debate. This platform is also archival and accessible; the thread could be scraped in full, whereas capturing an entire Twitter/X exchange (with all replies) can be more fragmentary due to platform limitations. Reddit comments often contain

rich linguistic play (including code-switching, humour, and memes via text), which suits our analytical focus on performativity and conflict in language.

3.3. Analytical Approach

The study employs a qualitative discourse analysis approach. After data collection, the Reddit comments were read and re-read to identify emergent themes and patterns. An inductive coding process was used initially to mark instances of humour, sarcasm, code-switching, explicit insults, metalinguistic commentary (users talking about language or accents), and references to in-group/out-group dynamics. These codes were then examined through the lenses of performative Englishes and conflict talk in a deductive phase. For example, a comment where a user mimics the *shimenet* pronunciation in a creative way was analyzed with Moody’s framework (as a performance of identity or satire), whereas a comment filled with derogatory labels for the other side was analyzed with Lee’s framework (as an instance of othering in conflict talk).

Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to linguistic features (choice of language or dialect, use of colloquialisms, tone of writing such as formal vs. slang) and interactional features (who responds to whom, whether they agree or argue, and how they align themselves). Given that many comments were in a mix of English and Filipino, translations are provided in the narrative where necessary, but the original wording is preserved in quotes to retain the flavor of the discourse. I also incorporate visual evidence (screenshots of key comments) to convey the authenticity of the online interactions. All user identities are referenced by their Reddit handles, which are publicly visible in the thread; these are not real names and thus help protect individual privacy while allowing us to attribute viewpoints in context.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. “Shimenet” as Performative Humour and Social Marker

One of the most striking aspects of the Reddit discussion was how users themselves performed with language while talking about *shimenet*. Far from being a neutral debate, many comments were laced with sarcasm, creative wordplay, and intertextual references to pop culture – all of which served to perform the commenter’s stance in a humorous way. For instance, a highly upvoted comment by user *nowhereman_ph* sarcastically listed the slurs used by Duterte’s supporters against opposition leader Leni Robredo: “‘Leni Lugaw’, ‘Madumb’, ‘Kakampwet’.” He then contrasted it with the current outrage, mimicking the defenders: “‘Shimenet’ – you are attacking our accent!” Finally, he delivered a punchline dismissing the hypocrisy: “Nope, we’re just shitting on Fiona because she’s a spoiled little bitch.” This comment (Figure 2) is performative on multiple levels. The user switches into an imagined voice of Duterte’s supporters (“you are attacking our accent!”) only to bluntly refute it in his own voice with crude humour. By using colloquial and profane language (“shitting on Fiona”), *nowhereman_ph* performs a rebellious, irreverent identity – aligning with an in-group of Duterte critics who pride themselves on *not* being polite or deferential to the powerful. The use of the nickname “Fiona” (a reference to an ogre princess character) to label Sara Duterte is itself a performative act of othering through humour; it signals the speaker’s membership in a subculture that circulates these referents. The community rewarded this performance (it received 428 upvotes, indicating broad agreement or amusement), suggesting that the in-group norm in this thread was to find the *shimenet* ridicule acceptable and even laudable as witty remarks.



Figure-2: Excerpt of a top-rated Reddit comment exchange

User Bitter-Weekend772 asks if voters rewarded Leni Robredo for being mocked (“binoto ba nila si Leni kasi nilait at inapi sya...?”), implying they did not. In reply, nowhereman_ph lists epithets used against Robredo (“Leni Lugaw”, etc.) and mocks the current defense of Duterte’s accent (“you are attacking our accent!”). He then bluntly concludes that the ridicule is justified because Sara Duterte (nicknamed “Fiona”) is “a spoiled little bitch.” This exchange illustrates the community’s use of sarcastic humour and role-play to highlight perceived hypocrisy.

Throughout the thread, many users engaged in similar performances of linguistic creativity. Some peppered their comments with the word “shimenet” itself in playful contexts, turning it into a verb or an allusion. For example, one user jokingly wrote “shimenet like boom boom boom”, echoing a lyric from a Black Eyed Peas dance song, to make a lighthearted parody. Another user rdnk023 quipped (in Tagalog-English mix) that since Duterte supporters mercilessly mocked Leni before, “So go lang tayo sa shimenet. Hahaha.” (roughly, “So let’s just go ahead with *shimenet*. Haha”). By using *shimenet* in this cheer-like exhortation, the commenter performs solidarity with the meme-spreaders and frames the act of saying *shimenet* as a collective rallying cry. This performative usage reinforces in-group bonding – only those who understand the meme and the history behind it will fully appreciate the humour, thus marking who is “in” on the joke.

Notably, code-switching and Taglish were frequently employed as stylistic tools. Code-switching allowed commenters to strike a balance between the authority of English and the authenticity or emotional resonance of Filipino. For instance, a comment might start in English for expository or sarcastic effect, then switch to Filipino for the punchline or to convey sentiment that “hits home” culturally. This echoes Moody’s point that in a country like the Philippines, English usage often toggles between conveying authority and authenticity. Here, we see that dynamic in action: commenters use English to engage in a globalized discourse of political satire, but weave in Filipino to assert local identity or emphatic mood. The end result is a polyglossic performance – the community collectively showcases a bilingual wit that both entertains and signals membership in a shared socio-political stance.

However, the performativity of *shimenet* was not one-dimensional. A few voices reminded the group of an alternate performance: that of Sara Duterte and her allies using *shimenet* to perform victimhood. As one Redditor (YogurtclosetHappy608) noted, there is a “double-sided effect” to the meme: “Some people will laugh, [but] the majority will relate with SWOH [Sara Without H(onesty) – a nickname for Sara]. So please only share if [your] friend list [is a] good audience, parang ganon.” In mixing English and Filipino, this commenter agrees with Ricky Rosales’s warning, effectively performing the role of the cautious insider who understands meme culture but is wary of its wider impact. The phrase “*parang ganon*” (“something like that”) in Filipino adds a tone of casual, almost resigned advice at the end, as if the user is stepping out of the jokester persona and speaking earnestly. This shows an awareness that how one performs linguistically in one context (Reddit or among like-minded friends) may not play the same way to a broader audience. It’s a meta-commentary on performativity: the user is saying we need to modulate our performance depending on who is watching. Thus, even as most of the thread relished the humorous performance of mocking *shimenet*, there was a subtler performance of self-reflection by a minority.

Shimenet in this Reddit discourse functioned as more than a reference to a mispronounced phrase – it became a social marker around which users-built performances of identity and solidarity. Dropping “shimenet” in clever ways, mixing languages, and invoking shared cultural references turned the thread into a stage. On this stage, Duterte’s detractors performed as a witty in-group fluent in both internet humour and sociopolitical subtext, while a few others performed as the voice of caution. The interplay of these performances underscored Moody’s argument that English (and language choice in general) in popular culture is deeply tied to identity work. Here, to laugh or not to laugh at *shimenet* was to signal which side of a cultural divide one stood on, and how one saw oneself in relation to issues of accent, class, and power.

4.2. Conflict Talk: Humour Becomes Hostility

If performative humour was the sugar coating of the *shimenet* thread, underneath it lay a hard core of conflict and othering. The discussion, while often funny, was undeniably polarized. Lee’s conflict talk framework is useful for dissecting how Redditors linguistically enforced an Us vs. Them divide, effectively using *shimenet* as a weapon in a culture war.

One clear pattern was the use of derogatory labeling to characterize the opposing camp. Duterte’s supporters (or those perceived to be defending her) were routinely branded as “DDS” (Diehard Duterte Supporters, a common label) or mocked as tards (from “Dutertards”), and described as “losers, the bottom of the barrel”. In one comment, after dismissing Sara’s defenders as losers, the user switches to Filipino to diagnose the root of

their behavior: “Yung panlalait nila kay Leni is ad hominem... Ito ay yung deep rooted insecurity ng mga taong never nanalo sa buhay.” (“Their bashing of Leni was ad hominem... It’s the deep-rooted insecurity of people who have never won in life.”). This is a direct application of conflict talk strategy: the commenter references the opponent’s presumed personal failings (never winning in life) and attributes a stereotype of insecurity to Duterte’s base. The tone is openly contemptuous, painting the out-group (Duterte’s fans) as envious underachievers lashing out. By psychologizing the opponent, the speaker othered them as irrational and inferior.

Within the thread, direct clashing between users was somewhat limited because most commenters were on the anti-Duterte side. However, we do see fragments of interpersonal conflict in reply to chains. When one user hypothetically asked if people voted for Leni Robredo just because she was insulted (implying that being mocked doesn’t automatically generate sympathy votes), others were quick to retort with scathing sarcasm (as seen in Figure 2). There is a palpable “tone” of tribalism. The underlying message of many comments was that “our side” (those mocking *shimenet*) is righteously justified, and “their side” (those complaining about the mockery) are hypocrites who did worse before. The phrase “*Quits lang*” (roughly, “now we’re even”), which appeared in one comment, encapsulates this tit-for-tat mentality. It suggests that since Duterte’s camp dished out ridicule in the past (e.g., calling Robredo *lutang* or dumb), they have no moral high ground to complain now; any suffering of theirs is just payback. This is essentially othering through moral accounting – framing the discourse as a scorecard of insults traded between two enduring factions. By that logic, empathy or rules of civility only apply within one’s in-group; against the out-group, any attack is fair game if provoked.

The content of insults also revealed how language itself was central to the boundary-marking. Calling someone “bobo” (dumb) and making fun of broken English has long been a political mud-slinging tactic in the Philippines (Cagoco-Guiam, 2019; Porras, 2022). The *shimenet* incident, ironically, flipped the script: now it was the anti-Duterte folks leveraging an English “lapse” to mock someone. This role reversal was not lost on participants. Some self-aware comments acknowledged that *shimenet* memes tread a fine line. As one wrote in a mix of English and Tagalog, “Di naman accent issue yung shimenet eh. Pinipilit niya lang artehan salita niya.” (“The *shimenet* issue isn’t really about accent. She’s just forcing a pretentious way of speaking.”). Here the commenter defends the meme as targeting not the Visayan accent per se but the perceived affectation – implying Sara Duterte was trying too hard to speak English in a certain way. This argument attempts to neutralize the charge of regional discrimination by reframing the conflict: it’s not Bisaya vs. English, but sincerity vs. pretentiousness. If accepted, it absolves the mockers of being “language bullies” and instead casts them as enforcers of authenticity (interestingly another form of gatekeeping). However, whether this nuanced distinction holds in practice is debatable; it shows the commenters grappling with exactly what boundary *shibboleth* is being policed via *shimenet*.

In terms of Lee’s conflict talk specifics, the Reddit data showed ample use of offensive lexicon (“bitch,” “fuck you,” “gago,” etc.) to underscore disdain. These served to energize the in-group – a sense of communal catharsis is evident when users pile on curses towards a commonly disliked figure (Sara Duterte) or her supporters. Additionally, accusations of bias and hypocrisy were rampant, which is a hallmark of othering discourse. Each side accused the other of a double standard: one side says “you mocked Leni’s way of speaking, so you can’t complain now,” while the other says “you claim to champion the masses, yet you mock a provincial accent.” Both arguments construct the opponent as unprincipled. The Reddit thread, being predominantly anti-Duterte, skewed heavily toward the former stance, but through Rosales’s post and its few defenders, the latter stance (calling out regional prejudice) was at least present as a foil.

Interestingly, the thread did not devolve into any open hatred toward Visayans as a group – likely because most participants were themselves not actually engaging in regional bigotry, but rather using the meme to target one individual. This highlights a subtle point: while *shimenet* acted like a *shibboleth* for identifying insiders and outsiders, those insiders/outsideers were defined more by political allegiance than by linguistic identity. In other words, a Visayan who was anti-Duterte could be fully “inside” the group laughing at *shimenet* (and indeed some self-identified Visayan commenters said they found it funny), whereas a Tagalog Duterte supporter would be “outside.” The lines of conflict were drawn politically, but expressed linguistically. Accents became a proxy for loyalty or opposition.

To sum up the conflict dimension: the *shimenet* meme precipitated a digital skirmish where language was both the battleground and the ammunition. Redditors enforced social boundaries by using *shimenet* as a litmus test – if you laughed and used it, you were likely part of the anti-government crowd; if you objected to it, you were branded a Duterte sympathizer. Each camp used conflict talk strategies to demean the other: the dominant camp on Reddit relished in ridicule and moral vindication, while the minority perspective cautioned that such

ridicule only feeds a victim narrative. The communicative choices made – switching languages to deliver barbs, name-calling, invoking past grievances – all served to reinforce group identity at the expense of the other. In effect, *shimenet* became a focal point for linguistic gatekeeping: it was not just a joke, but a shibboleth demarcating who “gets it” (and is thus in the right) versus who doesn’t (and is thus suspect). This finding resonates strongly with Lee’s observations of online conflict: language choices (even humorous ones) are marshaled to fortify in-group solidarity and denigrate out-groups, perpetuating social divides even in the guise of entertainment.

5. Conclusion

The case of “Shimenet” illustrates how a single mispronunciation can evolve into a complex cultural symbol within digital discourse, embodying both communal humour and conflict. This study, through a detailed analysis of a Reddit thread sparked by the *shimenet* meme, has demonstrated that pronunciation can serve as a potent symbolic marker of inclusion and exclusion. In the online realm, those who pronounce, use, or simply understand the meme align themselves against those who do not, thereby establishing social boundaries that echo deeper historical and linguistic hierarchies. This micro-event — originating from a slip of the tongue — mirrors larger social patterns in the Philippines, where language and accent are intimately tied to questions of education, class, region, and even political legitimacy.

The *shimenet* phenomenon, therefore, is not simply a joke or a fleeting internet trend but a representation of how digital spaces act as amplifiers for longstanding sociolinguistic anxieties. By repurposing an error in speech into a shared cultural artifact, this meme not only highlights the dynamic nature of language in digital spaces but also underlines the broader implications of linguistic performance in negotiating identity. What is particularly striking is the speed with which a linguistic error is transformed from a momentary lapse into a sustained online practice — embedded into meme culture, remixed by netizens, and deployed in debates not just for entertainment but for social and political critique.

As an online shibboleth, *shimenet* has become a focal point for debates on linguistic prestige, regional identity, and social power in the Philippines. In a country where English is both a colonial legacy and a contemporary marker of social status, linguistic slips such as this reveal the deep-rooted tensions between global and local expressions of identity. The Philippines’ complex sociolinguistic landscape — with its mixture of Tagalog, regional languages, and English — creates an environment where small differences in pronunciation or accent can trigger strong public reactions, especially in digital spaces where the boundaries of civility are often blurred.

This research contributes to our understanding of how digital media can transform ordinary language errors into symbols laden with political and social significance, ultimately influencing the discourse on who “speaks correctly” in an increasingly connected, yet divided, society. The case of *shimenet* serves as a potent reminder of the role that language plays not only in communication but also in power dynamics, where the speaker’s social position, region, and even perceived intelligence can be judged on the basis of a single misstep.

By applying Moody’s and Lee’s frameworks, we gained insight into two intertwined dimensions of this phenomenon. On one hand, performative Englishes were at play: netizens used *shimenet* and code-switching creatively to perform identities, critique authorities, and bond with like-minded peers. The meme provided a stage for enacting class tensions and local vs. global posturing through language – reflecting the Philippines’ ongoing dance with English as both a marker of prestige and a canvas for local expression. English, as in many postcolonial nations, is not a neutral medium but a linguistic battleground where power, modernity, and belonging are negotiated. On the other hand, conflict talk permeated the discourse: participants leveraged the meme to draw us/them lines, employing sarcasm, insults, and appeals to bias in order to assert moral superiority or defend collective dignity.

Academically, examining *shimenet* through these lenses contributes to a deeper understanding of digital discourse and sociolinguistic identity in postcolonial contexts. First, it highlights how online linguistic gatekeeping occurs: communities enforce norms about “correct” or “acceptable” speech not just through formal rules but through ridicule and metalinguistic commentary. In a postcolonial society like the Philippines, where language is tied to historical power (Tupas, 2020), a meme like *shimenet* becomes a flashpoint for latent tensions. In digital environments, these tensions are surfaced and intensified, as the space allows for anonymity and rapid participation. The study shows that digital media provide a new arena for these age-old struggles over language and identity, one where participation is broad and instant, and thus the policing of language can become a mass participation event.

Second, this research adds to the literature on digital sociolinguistics by documenting how a viral moment can catalyze explicit discussions of accent bias and group identity. The *shimenet* meme, while trivial on the surface, prompted people to articulate their attitudes toward regional accents, often revealing ingrained prejudices or defensiveness. It serves as a contemporary example of how an accent can act as a gatekeeping tool (who is deemed credible or “one of us” versus who is mocked). This echoes findings in sociolinguistics about accent discrimination (Lippi-Green, 1997) but shows it unfolding in real time in an online public sphere. Such case studies are valuable for understanding how linguistic inequalities or stereotypes are reproduced, challenged, or modified in the age of memes and social networks.

Additionally, the proliferation of *shimenet* as a viral cultural artifact points to the deep interconnection between humour and social critique in digital communication. Language-based humour, particularly when centered on perceived “errors,” offers a socially sanctioned mechanism for both reinforcing and contesting linguistic hierarchies. In the case of the Philippines, where English proficiency is often treated as a symbol of class, education, and urban identity, this meme embodies a wider conversation about the place of English in the Filipino imagination — oscillating between aspiration and alienation, pride and resentment.

The findings emphasize the dual role of humour in online political discourse. Humour can reinforce social hierarchies — in this case, perhaps unintentionally bolstering an implicit hierarchy that privileges certain ways of speaking English — even as it also empowers the disenfranchised to voice dissent — here, allowing ordinary citizens to mock a powerful official without fear. This duality is particularly salient in postcolonial settings, where laughter at the mis-English of a leader might be seen as democratizing (bringing a lofty figure down to earth), yet it can also be seen as insidiously upholding the notion that some Englishes are inferior. The academic significance lies in appreciating this nuanced impact: digital memes like *shimenet* are not just trivial distractions; they are sites where cultural norms and political ideologies are contested under the guise of play.

Moreover, the meme’s longevity and resonance indicate how digital culture allows language-based jokes to mutate and spread, far beyond their original contexts, creating new communities of practice. In many ways, *shimenet* exemplifies the power of the internet to elevate the mundane — a slip of the tongue — into a meaningful site of collective memory and ongoing negotiation of social boundaries. This process highlights the need for sociolinguistic inquiry not to underestimate the significance of humour, memes, and online commentary as serious cultural artifacts worthy of study.

Shimenet as shibboleth exemplifies how language, power, and identity intersect in Philippine social media. The meme’s trajectory — from a congressional slip-up to a nationwide inside joke to a subject of meta-debate — teaches us that even in the fast-paced world of online humour, the deep structures of sociolinguistic identity persist. The way Filipinos engaged with this meme reflects their ongoing negotiation with their colonial past (English as legacy), their internal linguistic diversity, and their political fault lines. The meme thus functions as both a mirror and a megaphone for the complex relationships between language, identity, and power. As such, this study contributes to a growing body of research that treats internet memes and online commentary as meaningful data for sociolinguistic inquiry. It invites further research into other “viral linguistics” episodes, and it suggests that educators, communicators, and leaders should pay attention to the messages beneath the mirth: a reminder that in the Philippines, as elsewhere, language remains a key battleground for inclusion and exclusion in the digital age.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Cagoco-Guiam, R. (2019, April 22). *Mudslinging as a presidential pastime*. Philippine Daily Inquirer. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/120888/mudslinging-as-a-presidential-pastime>
- Calimbo, A. C. (2016). Deconstructing myths via humour: A semiotic analysis of Philippine political internet memes. *Langkit: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6, 1-20.
- De Leon, F. M. G., & Ballesteros-Lintao, R. (2021). The rise of meme culture: Internet political memes as tools for analysing Philippine propaganda. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, 2(4), 1-13.
- Escudero, C. (2024, September 3). *What is ‘shimenet’? Sara Duterte’s answers during OVP budget talks spark memes, discussions online*. Rappler. <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/shimenet-trend-sara-duterte-ovp-budget-hearing-2025/>

- Jaucian, M. C. A. (2023). English and identity performance in Filipino vlogs. *Asian Englishes*, 26(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2023.2174544>
- Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification, and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and the literature* (pp. 11–30). Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, J. S. (2020). Sports, Instagram, and conflict talk in Englishes. *World Englishes*, 39(1), 94–105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12449>
- limpinpark. (2024, August). *Professor Ricky Rosales on the "Shimemet" fiasco* [Online forum post]. Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/Philippines/comments/1f4kxjw/professor_ricky_rosales_on_the_shimemet_fiasco/
- Lippi-Green, R. (1997). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. Routledge.
- Moody, A. (2020). The authority and authenticity of performative Englishes in popular culture. *World Englishes*, 39(3), 416–432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12486>
- Pinugu, E. (2024, September 2). Unpacking 'shimemet'. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/176507/unpacking-shimemet>
- Porras, K. I. M. (2022). A reflection of linguistic ideologies, inequality, and class: Language shaming practices on Facebook. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 7(2), 235–243. <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.72.30>
- Rosales, R. [@ricky17.rosales]. (2024, August 30). *Medyo delikado ang diskurso ng "Shimemet"...* [Facebook status update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/ricky17.rosales/posts/pfbid0JpstMv8fJu83LycAQ9cTCWtsDHZiKHw5Xd8Zq8YghD8858hfYWVboWkaHJV4Tm3zl>
- Tupas, R. (2020). Decentering language: Displacing Englishes from the study of Englishes. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 17(3), 228–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2019.1641097>