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## Why isn't it spelled "*Philippino*?"

Here at the *Pilipino Express* we often hear this question from non-Filipinos: "*Pilipino*? Isn't it *Filipino*?" Or: "Shouldn't it be spelled *Philippino* because it's from the Philippines?"

These are fair questions when they come from people who are not familiar with Filipino culture and history but sometimes the erroneous *Ph* spelling even pops up on signs at certain local Filipino establishments. I wonder if this is an indication that some segments of the community are becoming assimilated into the mainstream after 50 years in Winnipeg.

Lately it seems my friends and I have been explaining this spelling problem a little more often than usual, so I thought it would be a good time for us to return to this topic.

### *Spelling confusion*

This uncertainty in spelling is due to the intertwined history of three languages – Spanish, English and Filipino. The country we call the Philippines today is a collection of about 7,100 islands in Southeast Asia that was once a colony of the Spanish Empire. When the Spaniards arrived in the early 1500s, there was no single nation united under one name but, rather, many autonomous chiefdoms, each with its own name and leader. The Spaniards called various parts of the archipelago by various names – *New Castile*, *the Spanish East Indies*, *St. Lazarus*

and others, but eventually they settled on one name for all the islands; *Las Islas Filipinas*. This name was given to honour their Prince Philip who eventually became King Philip II. Anglos might remember him as the king who sent his Armada to attack Queen Elizabeth's England in 1588.

### *Filipinas*

Of course, Philip is just the English version of the Spanish name Felipe, so *Filipinas* was usually spelled with an *F*. I say usually because spelling was not yet standardized during the early part of the Spanish colonial period in the Philippines. Practically every possible variation of spelling can be found for the word *Filipinas* in books of the 1500s and 1600s – *Filippinas*, *Felipinas*, *Philippinas*, *Philippinas* and even *Piliphinas*. It is one of history's cruel and ironic twists that the Filipinos and their country were named after a monarch whose name began with a sound that was completely foreign to their own tongues – the sound of *F*.

### *Philippines*

When translated into English, *Las Islas Filipinas* is "the Philippine Islands," spelled with *Ph* to match the spelling of Philip. Sometime shortly after World War II, the "Islands" part of the name was dropped, so now we just call it the Philippines.

### *Filipino*

The Spanish word for a person from *Las Islas Filipinas* was naturally *Filipino*, with an *F*. Originally this referred to a Spaniard born in the Philippines, not to an indigenous inhabitant of the islands. The people we know as Filipinos today, the Spaniards once called *Indios*, which is the same

stupid misnomer that my ancestors gave to the original inhabitants of North America – *Indians*.

English never had a suitable equivalent for Filipino – a *Philippine*, *Philippian* or *Philippinian* probably just didn't sound right, so English adopted the Spanish word *Filipino*, retaining the letter *F* and the suffix, "*ino*."

## *Pilipino*

After the Spanish-American War at the end of the 1800s, the Americans held the Philippines for almost 50 years. During that time Filipinos developed a national language of their own. This language was called *Pilipino*. It was based mainly on Tagalog, which is the language of the region around the capitol, Manila. (Some traditions say that the name Tagalog is from *taga-ilog*, which refers to people "from the river area.") *Pilipino* was spelled with a *P* because the sound of *F* was foreign to Tagalog and to most of the other 170 languages and dialects of the islands. Also, since the ancient Filipino script called *baybayin* didn't have an *F*, it was not included in the official *Pilipino* alphabet, either. This was known as the *abakada*.

So, the national language became, *Pilipino*, the people called themselves *Pilipino* and *Pilipina*, and they called their country *Pilipinas*. Of course, foreigners continued to use their own words for the name of the country.

## *Back to Filipino*

As time went on, the authorities in charge of developing the national language had to accept the fact that foreign words and sounds were already a part of everyday *Pilipino* speech. They overhauled the official alphabet in the 1970s and again in the 1980s, so it now includes foreign letters such as *F*. Today the

language is officially called *Filipino* and the country is *Filipinas*, though Philippines is still the English name. The official Filipino language recognizes both *Filipino* and *Pilipino*, and the feminine *Filipina* and *Pilipina*, as acceptable terms for the citizens of the Philippines.

## *Pinoy*

The slang terms *Pinoy* (for men) and *Pinay* (for women) also arose during the 20th century. They were first used by Filipinos in the United States in the 1920s, and then later adopted in the Philippines. These words are similar to "Canuck," for Canadians or "Yankee" for Americans, except that they don't have the derogatory sense that outsiders sometimes apply to Canuck or Yankee.

## *The Filipino language*

Another question I'm asked from time to time is, "What do Filipinos speak? It's like Spanish, right? What's it called? *Tag-a-Log*?" Some people who are not familiar with Filipino culture have different ideas about what Filipinos speak. Some think it is a kind of pidgin or Creole based on Spanish while others assume it is like Chinese or Vietnamese. However, Tagalog (pronounced *tah-GAH-log*) and the other major languages of the Philippines are, in fact, languages in their own right. And even though Filipinos sometimes talk about their own particular "dialects," like Cebuano or Ilokano, these are actually distinct languages, not dialects. These languages are related to each other and they each have their own variations or dialects.

The languages of the Philippines share a common ancestry with the languages of Malaysia and Indonesia. Many basic Malaysian words, like the numbers and the parts of the body, are so similar to Philippine languages that a Tagalog person

hearing Malaysian might even mistake it for one of the languages of the southern Philippines. All these languages are part of the Austronesian family of languages, also known as Malayo-Polynesian, which reaches from Madagascar, just east of Africa, through the islands of Southeast Asia, all the way to Guam, Hawaii and even to Easter Island (Rapa Nui), just west of South America.

Filipino and the regional languages of the Philippines have a rich vocabulary with borrowings from many sources, thanks to a long history of trade contacts with many neighbouring countries. The Chinese brought many words related to food, cooking, business and even family related terms like *kuya* and *ate* for eldest brother and eldest sister. Hindus and Muslims from Malaysia and Indonesia brought words with roots going back to the ancient Sanskrit language of India – words related to the arts and religion, like *katha*, *likha*, and *diwata* (literary work, creation and goddess).

The Spaniards brought words related to Christianity, government and technology up to the 19th century. And due to their long occupation, Spanish words even displaced some basic indigenous words like *bisig* for arm, which is more commonly called by the Spanish-derived term *braso*. The word *bozes*, from the Spanish *voz*, for "voice" is used more often than the Tagalog word *tinig*, which has since taken on a more poetic tone.

English now supplies the majority of words related to modern technology, arts and pop culture. With this mixture of accepted borrowings, various regional languages and the common use of *Taglish* (Tagalog/English slang), it's no wonder that some non-Filipinos might not know how to describe what they hear when Filipinos are talking to each other.

So, to sum it all up:

- Philippines is the English name for the country, while –
- *Filipinas* is both the Spanish and Filipino name for the Philippines.
- The people are called Filipinos in English, Spanish and Filipino,
- but many Filipinos still prefer to call themselves *Pilipino* and their country *Pilipinas*.
- The national language is based on Tagalog but it has many words borrowed from languages near and far. For a time it was called *Pilipino* but now its official name in all three languages is Filipino.

Oh, and *Philipino*, *Philippino* and *Phillippino*? Well, those are just wrong.

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*This and other articles by Paul Morrow can be found at [www.pilipino-express.com](http://www.pilipino-express.com). Also visit [Sarisari etc.](#) for more about Filipino history and language and find the author on [Facebook](#).*