Beyond borders: Philippine multilingualism in use

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The Philippines are a multilingual archipelago of 7000 islands on which over 120 different languages are spoken. The different stages of globalization are distinctively visible in the linguistic landscape of the Philippines, as the language boundaries move in relation to the political and religious boundaries throughout the country’s history.

Before the arrival of the Spanish, numerous tribes with different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds lived on the archipelago, however, they were connected through intense trade. Most people were proficient in at least three languages in order to communicate across the boundaries. With the arrival of the Spanish, the islands – though now unified – built up strong linguistic boundaries by dividing the land and put it under the control of different religious orders of the Catholic Church. When the United States took over, they were instituting English as the language to ”civilize” the people and it served as lingua franca. In the era of global capital markets, the Philippines – a country from the periphery – align their economy to serve the center of the globalized world and one way of doing so is by using the English language as a commodity and sending workers abroad.

The presented case study analyzes the multilingual conversations of a group of Philippine immigrants with different linguistic backgrounds, who meet around a market stall in Basel/Switzerland. The material shows the multi-layered multilingualism that is a reality for Philippine overseas workers. The study depicts the latest shift of the linguistic boundaries in a space that transgresses the merely geographical. The findings shall provide insights into the dynamics of the language situation in a globalized context.

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