

Are You Filipino or Filipinx?

It's an ongoing debate for people of Philippine origin or descent, sparking discussions on identity, colonialism, and the power of language.



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Image: Jordan Lee / VICE

In September 2020, Dictionary.com released the biggest update to its list of words, with 650 new terms. While most of these flew under the radar, one reignited a heated debate on Philippine social media. Lexicographers had [added](#) the word “[Filipinx](#),” meant as an alternative to the “Filipino” and “Filipina” demonyms for those living or who have origins in the Philippines. While it is intended to promote diversity, the word instead sparked arguments about identity, colonialism, and the power of language.

Some — mostly those who grew up in the Philippines — argue that “Filipino” is already a gender-neutral term because the Filipino language itself does not differentiate between genders. Meanwhile, others — mostly from the large Filipino diaspora — say it is sexist, a holdover from the gendered Spanish that influenced the country’s languages. Now, on both social media and in classrooms, the war of words is highlighting differences between generations, cultures, and nations.

Nanette Caspillo, a former University of the Philippines professor of European languages, studies morphology, or how words are formed. She said that “Filipinx” is an unnatural term because the suffix “-x” does not exist in the Philippine linguistic system.

“Morphology is influenced by phonetics so if it is problematic morphologically speaking, it is also difficult for it to stand phonetically speaking,” she told VICE.

“[Language] is the human expression of man’s interior and exterior reality,” Caspillo added, explaining that if a linguistic phenomenon does not reflect reality, then it will die a natural death. Right now, most people in the Philippines do not seem to recognize, understand, relate to, or assert Filipinx as their identity. Therefore, “the word [‘Filipinx’] does not naturally evoke a meaning that reflects an entity in reality,” she said. Pronouns in the Filipino language are gender-neutral and “Pilipino” is used for both men and women.

“Filipinx has not reached collective consciousness,” Caspillo said, perhaps because fewer people have heard of and relate to the new term.

Many Filipinos in the Philippines see “Filipinx” [as synonymous with “Filipinx American.”](#) Even Dictionary.com [defines “Filipinx”](#) as “of or relating to people of Philippine origin or descent, especially those living in the United States.” For some, this comes with negative stereotypes that Filipino Americans are privileged and unaware of the realities those in the Philippines face. They are seen as whitewashed, and “Filipinx” as their way to further distance themselves from the motherland. Their very identity is questioned for changing one letter.

But the word is more than semantics. For many, using “Filipinx” has real, profound meaning. Some don’t identify with the term “Filipino” and see it as a “post-colonial identity” given by colonizers. Meanwhile, many in the LGBTQ community feel that invalidating the Filipinx identity actually ignores the realities of those who don’t identify with the traditional gender binary. This perspective is not new. “Filipinx” is a term inspired by the Latin American community, some of whom have started identifying as “Latinx” instead of “Latino” or “Latina,” as a symbol of language decolonization and a way to support gender fluidity.

In an interview with VICE, the student-led Filipino Club at Fordham University observed that, similarly, “Filipinx” is a term that “many Fil-Ams do find comfort in.” After a student questioned the use of “Filipinx” in a newsletter, the organization decided to use “Filipino” as a default but said it will “approach the use of the term ‘Filipinx’ depending on individual circumstances.” They still want to use the term as a form of allyship. The incident led to broader conversations on decolonization in Filipino culture, particularly in language, and how students tackle it themselves. The group followed this up with a month of surveys and discussions about Filipino American History.

“It seems to me that ‘Filipinx’ is gender neutral and therefore more inclusive,” the advisor of the Filipino Club said.

“Filipinx” is also a [generational](#) term, used more by younger people, both in the Philippines and around the world. Many millennials and Gen Z say that although “Filipino” is inherently gender-neutral, the fact that the feminine counterpart “Filipina” exists, means that the local language has “gendered grammar,” similar to Spanish. Older Filipinos, on the other hand, argue that the term “Filipino” is in fact gender neutral, just like the term actor, which may refer to both men and women.

It’s a debate that has launched countless heated arguments online and for Tuting Hernandez, a professor of Linguistics at UP, the divide comes from people’s refusal to understand the lived experiences of those on the other side.

“Unfortunately, there is no discussion happening, instead what you have is a ‘memetic’ war that is totally devoid of mindfulness and the willingness to listen and accommodate the other’s beliefs and personal histories,” he said.

One seemingly sarcastic tweet insists that we might as well use “mamser” instead of “Filipinx” because it is “friendly and easy to pronounce, fun for the whole family, and reclaims ‘ma’am, sir’ into a singular, genderless term.”

Many believe that “Filipinx” is a new label that is not meant to subtract, erase, or change anyone, but is for people to choose how to express themselves. And although it is an unnatural progression for the language, it could, in time, be widely used and accepted.

“Language is shaped by the history of its people and the reality where it finds itself, including the laws of nature. Like anything bound in space and time, language evolves,” Caspillo said.

And if language reflects reality, then the voices of people who identify as Filipinx could be enough to prove its validity.

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