Original Article

# Accent Discrimination and Identity Empowerment in Filipino Media: The Case of Melai Cantiveros-Francisco

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**Abstract.** Discrimination based on accent is a recurring sociolinguistic issue in multilingual cultures that stigmatizes regional accents and associates them with poor competence or social degradation. Such bias in the Philippine context shapes how speakers are appraised in both day-to-day and media interactions. The paper employs Empowerment Theory as the theoretical framework to analyze how accent stigma might be redefined as identity empowerment through the mediated speech of Filipino TV celebrity Melai Cantiveros-Francisco. It explores the role of her linguistic and extralinguistic resources as means of signifying empowered authenticity, including speech patterns, diction, humor, body language, and audience engagement. The study was conducted following an Interactional Sociolinguistics approach, employing a qualitative discourse-analytic design. As the main data, two publicly available episodes of the *Magandang Buhay* talk show on YouTube were used. The videos were selected based on premeditation, transcribed at their natural frequency, and analyzed through repeated coding, in which empowerment-specific aspects were identified in both the power of speech and the non-speech of verbal and nonverbal interactions. The results show three interconnected dimensions of empowerment: intrapersonal (self-efficacy and confidence, as reflected in the retention of accents and stance), interactional (social validation and supportive alignment with co-participants and interactional framing), and behavioral (consistent authenticity and agency across communicative situations). Taken together, these trends show that a regionalist accent does not function as a deficit but rather serves as an interactional tool for self-construction and validity within the discourse. The paper identifies how the empowered accent performance conveys the current ideology of the standard language in a negative manner and shifts toward a scenario in which the regional voice is treated as a positive attribute of originality. The findings contribute to knowledge of linguistic identity formation in Philippine media and underscore the importance of inclusive media practices that recognize linguistic diversity as a tool of social empowerment.

*Keywords: Accent discrimination; Discourse analysis; Linguistic identity; Authenticity; Filipino media.*

Discrimination based on accent is still one of the ongoing forms of linguistic discrimination in multilingual communities, where the variation of different speech forms is not perceived as deviation but rather as a social indication that can justify the exclusion. Accent is a highly salient signal in the Philippine language,

where linguistic diversification is the norm, and speakers are judged, classified, and unintentionally mocked by it. According to recent literature, attitudes toward accents are seldom neutral: speakers displaying such features are likely to be viewed as less or more competent, as having a lower or higher educational background, as more or less credible, and as more or less ethical than poorly accentuated speakers (Hideg et al., 2024). In Filipino English, where regional forms of speech are often assessed, the broader ideologies surrounding what constitutes standard, educated, or acceptable often manifest in accent; thus, accent serves as a potent site for reproducing inequality in everyday interaction (Quinto et al., 2024).

Philippine English and accent perception studies have also increasingly documented how accent is associated with prestige hierarchies. For example, data on social judgments of regional or accent variants suggest that speakers from certain regions may be stigmatized, not because their accents are unintelligible, but because listeners perceive them as markers of social difference (Mendoza, 2020). Similar studies on regional accents of Philippine English emphasize that audience judgment is shaped by social senses of locality, class, and educatedness, implying that accent-based prejudice is not necessarily rooted in the sound pattern itself but rather in ideology (Quinto et al., 2024). Such assessment trends can also be linked to broader language policy contexts in which specific forms of language gain institutional authority, whilst others are deemed inapplicable to formal or public life (Zeng & Li, 2023). In that environment, speakers may experience linguistic insecurity, or fear of mockery or rejection, and feel that their own variety does not align with a socially privileged standard (Tatel, 2019).

However, the Philippine situation is no different: even regional linguistic identities may be presented as valid, meaningful, and deserving of space among the populace, especially when speakers are unwilling to conform to the expectations of the dominant group. In recent studies on the perceptions of Philippine English and its acceptability and intelligibility the perceptions of the localized forms of the English language among Filipino diasporic listeners, the attitude to the forms of the English language is a complex phenomenon and can be both stigmatizing upon the viewer and growingly accepting on the perspectives and perceptions of what the good version of the language should consist of based on the audience position, a connection to one who identifies as Filipino and the expectations of the listener (Gustilo et al., 2025). This nuance is important for media, since broadcast and digital media not only reflect accent hierarchies; they can either uphold them (through stereotyping and mockery) or challenge them (through normalization and positive visibility). The media space, thus, is an important site where accent is critiqued, codified, commercialized, or re-domesticated, usually in shaping overall opinions about linguistic variety.

Although the literature provides an account of how accents are socialized in terms of being evaluated and the potential of the prejudice attached to the regional speech with references to the Philippine English situation (Mendoza, 2020; Quinto et al., 2024), less literature directly links the occurrence of accent discrimination to identity-empowerment processes within the paradigm of mainstream Filipino media discourse. Put differently, accent bias has been demonstrated to operate, but there has been limited targeted examination of how an agency can proactively reset the stigma of accent, turning it into an agency tool, a source of confidence, and a genuine identity, particularly in interactions with widely consumed talk shows. This difference is significant because media visibility can naturalize some voices and marginalize others, preventing regional speakers from feeling pride or pressure to conform. A discourse-oriented method can thus be used to advance sociolinguistic study by demonstrating how empowerment is achieved not only through what is said but also through how speakers position themselves, respond to judgments, and construct identity during face-to-face interaction.

To address this gap, the researcher examines the speech of Melai Cantiveros-Francisco, a well-known Filipino TV host who is known to use a Bisaya (Visayan) accent on national television despite her status as an educated and well-mannered child. The importance of Melai's public linguistic style lies in its introduction of a regional accent in an area where more standardized forms of speech are typically preferred, particularly in high-profile broadcasting. Her linguistic presence is therefore socially significant; it can be read as a comedic performance, cultural authenticity, or linguistic subjection—depending on how it is framed by audiences and other participants in the scene. Academic research on the application of the stylized Philippine accent in online and mediated environments suggests that the accent may be used to enact identity and to identify with audiences. It may also become a site of stereotyping when regional speech is reduced to entertainment value (Obenza et al., 2024). What to analyze, however, is not the ability to observe the presence of accent, but the way accent plays out in interaction: How accent is being normalized, how accent becomes marked, how the identity of the speaker is negotiated by means of both verbal and materialized signals.

Empowerment Theory Lens provides an effective paradigm for addressing such interactional life. In modern research concerning empowerment, it is pointed out that empowerment is not merely a personal state of feeling good but rather processes by which people are given a voice, authority, and control in social situations where otherwise they might face limitations (Bender et al., 2021). Research on psychological empowerment also supports the assumption that empowerment is associated with agency, perceived competence, meaning-making, and the capacity to shape the surrounding environment, which can be achieved through communicative behavior and social positioning (Llorente-Alonso et al., 2024). In media discourse, empowerment can be understood through speakers' positioning, their stigmatized status, their pursuit of authenticity, and their maintenance of confidence even in environments where certain linguistic practices have historically been privileged. Notably, empowerment is social: it is defined by others' reactions, the possibilities an environment offers for self-definition, and whether a speaker speaks in an authoritative voice.

In the Philippine broadcast talk shows, communicative legitimacy is negotiated on an ongoing basis. In talk shows, spontaneous interaction, humor, self-disclosure, and identity performance are practiced in ways that make the accent highly audible, thereby enabling social interpretation. Accent can serve as a cue that provokes stereotypical judgments, often leading to generalizations that stereotyping operates through implicit assumptions and culturally acquired prejudices rather than direct barriers to communication (Hideg et al., 2024). Nevertheless, it is also possible that the same environment will help maintain the speaker's empowerment, provided that the speaker refrains from accenting, appears authentic, resonates with the audience, and demonstrates social power through confident participation. In this respect, Melai's discourse may be regarded as an example of identity empowerment: the situation in which the regional accent is not hidden to conform to an external norm, but is maintained as an empty openness, as a resource of identity.

The mediated discourse presented in this work accordingly establishes the research by Melai Cantiveros-Francisco as a strategic place where identity empowerment might be achieved against the context of accent stigma within the Philippine media. Instead of treating accent as a fixed quality, the study treats it as a socially significant practice that interacts with humor, position-taking, audience alignment, and non-linguistic elements such as gesture, facial expression, and timing. This method also aligns with the requirement in language-ideology studies to examine not only policy and attitudes but also the daily discursive practices through which the use of appropriate language is constructed and contested in the life of the population (Zeng & Li, 2023). The research situates linguistic diversity, inclusion, and the social impacts of accent hierarchies within Philippine society by highlighting the presence of a high-profile media personality who maintains a regional accent in mainstream media.

Under this line of reasoning, the study aims to examine the findings of Empowerment Theory in relation to the narratives of identity empowerment in the discourse of Melai Cantiveros-Francisco, particularly where accent variations can serve as a subject of stereotyping. In particular, the study examines how empowerment is enacted through her linguistic choices (accent and style), how interactional patterns position her identity within a talk-show context, and how her communicative presence can either defy or redefine popular beliefs about regional accents. This way, the study will contribute to the recent research on accent evaluation and prejudice in situations of Philippine English contexts (Mendoza, 2020; Quinto et al., 2024) in addition to extending it to the theory of mediated discourse analysis, which prefigures empowerment as an interactional procedure and a social phenomenon (Bender et al., 2021; Llorente-Alonso et al., 2024). Finally, this question is not only important for examining the discrimination of accents within individuals but also vital for explaining how the Filipino media may reorganize linguistic differences to either perpetuate labeled identity pride and social belonging (Gustilo et al., 2025).

## Methodology
### Research Design
The research employed a single case study and a qualitative design, using a discourse analysis approach to examine the construction of identity empowerment through mediated talk-in-interaction. Discourse analysis has been chosen based on the same reason, where one can closely observe the context and sensitive aspect of the development of meanings and social identities by way of language decisions whose outcomes include accent retention, diction, code choice, and humor and non-linguistic resources such as gesture, facial expression, timing, and stance. The presented case is valuable in that it examines an informative representative of the population to clarify, on a larger scale, how a local accent can be re-signified as a strength within mainstream Filipino media

discourse rather than as a drawback. The frameworks of Interactional Sociolinguistics and Empowerment Theory were used to analyze contextualization cues and interactional meaning, and to interpret empowerment cues and indicators at the intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral levels.

**Research Informant**
This research paper was based on a single online target participant: Melanie Cantiveros-Francisco, a mainstream Filipino television host known for her regional Bisaya accent. She was chosen because she is a representative of the speaker who may be socially marked in Manila-focused media contexts, yet she retains her linguistic identity in interpersonal communication. Her example is pertinent to the study of how the concept of empowerment is enacted and experienced through language, humor, and interactional discourse in Filipino films.

**Research Instrument**
The primary research tool was a video group comprising two publicly available episodes of the Magandang Buhay talk show, downloaded from YouTube. The primary data source for discourse analysis is these videos. In order to systematically capture interactional detail, the researcher applied a hybrid transcription and a hybrid annotation guide consisting of conversation-analytic markers of pause, overlap, laughter, emphasis, and repair coupled with discourse transcription markers of turn and intonation-related segmentation alongside annotation of Interactional Sociolinguistics contextualization cues, including gesture, gaze, facial expression, and body movement. Where necessary, screenshots were also provided to convey critical nonverbal messages that could not be adequately captured in text-based transcription.

**Data Gathering Procedure**
To ensure transparency, the two episodes were selected from YouTube, an open-access platform, and recorded in a dataset log that included the video title, URL, upload date, length, and a brief content description. The episodes were deliberately chosen for their recentness at the time of collection and for the presence of continuous interaction, in which Melai actively participates in spontaneous discourse, as opposed to the highly truncated, cut-up segments. The selection also ensured sufficient audio clarity for transcription and sufficient visual clarity to depict nonverbal behavior relevant to discourse interpretation. Videos were repeatedly watched to develop familiarity with interactional patterns, and selected salient passages were transcribed verbatim, including all verbal and nonverbal cues, to preserve the interactional context and maintain the conditions observed in the talk show setting.

**Data Analysis Procedure**
The analysis was based on repeated discourse analysis coding and interpretation, using Interactional Sociolinguistics, and viewed through the prism of Empowerment Theory. The researcher undertook familiarization and preliminary coding to recognize the instances of empowerment relevancy in the talk of Melai, which included such aspects as accent retention, stance, humor tactics, code choice, telling stories, and affiliation with co-participants, and at the same time she noted non-linguistic signs such as laughter, timing, eye contact, and gesture that create meaning in communication. These original codes were then refined into a unified codebook and organized into domains of empowerment based on the intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral scales, thereby conceptualizing indicators of empowerment as practiced interactions with others rather than as abstract characteristics. That was the concluding analysis, which employed close reading as a sequential context to ensure that interpretations were grounded in what the participants were doing turn by turn and in how interactions with co-hosts or guests helped to enforce or strengthen meaning.

As an intervention to enhance validity, reliability, and trustworthiness, the study maintained an audit trail of dataset logs, transcription choices, code definitions, and analysis-related memos, and subjected a few excerpts to the code-recode procedure to assess consistency in interpretation over time. Peer debriefing or second-reader checks of a subset of excerpts were also employed, where possible, to improve the codebook and reduce interpretive bias, and to treat any disagreements as indicating the need to clarify definitions rather than as statistical indicators of reliability. Negative case analysis was also included to account for segments that may complicate a simple empowerment reading, ensuring that the conclusion reflects the full spectrum of discourse evidence. Two distinct episodes were used to conduct triangulation, a multimodal support of transcript-plus-visual annotation, and a theory triangulation of Interactional Sociolinguistics as a meaning-making theory and Empowerment Theory as a theory of interpreting indicators of empowerment.

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**Ethical Considerations**

No ethical approval was required for this study, as all video materials were publicly accessible on YouTube, an open online platform. The researcher did not manipulate, alter, or distribute the videos in any form that would compromise the privacy of individuals involved. The content analyzed remained within the bounds of fair academic use, and all sources were credited correctly in the study.

## Results and Discussion

**Melai's Experience during the Asia Artist Awards (AAA)**

In the first video, Melai was the main subject, sharing her experience at the Asia Artist Awards (AAA), which she regarded as one of her biggest achievements in the entertainment industry, as she was awarded the Best Actor award alongside other artists. In the video, Melai shared her once-in-a-lifetime experience while expressing gratitude. It can also be observed that the way she delivered her speech was no different from her interactions in other situations. While she was conversing with the other two hosts or speakers, her body language, speech style, diction, and accent were noticeable.
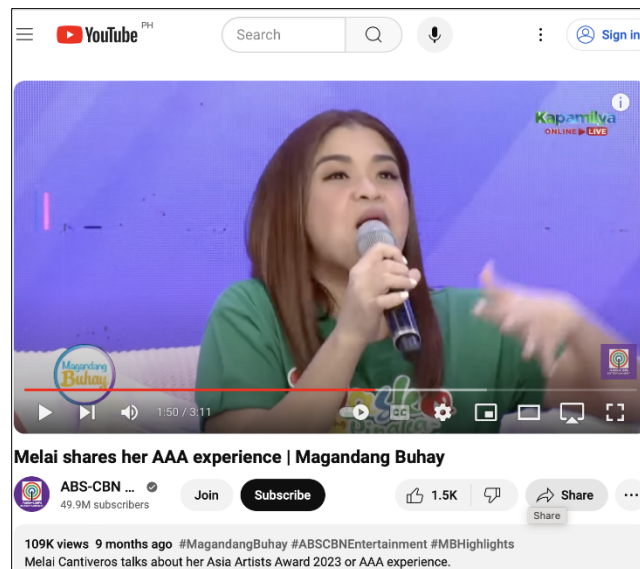
**Video 1 — Segment 1: Seating Incident**



**Figure 1.** *The Screenshot of Melai's Hand Gesture*

**Melai:**
1. "*At tsaka yung isa*" {points behind her}
2. "*inano (.)*"
3. "*dun ako sa kabilang table umupo.*"
4. "*Sabi niya (.)*"
5. '*No!*' {imitates stern tone}
6. "*Pinalipat ako dun.*"
7. "*Patay (.) dito ako.*"
8. "*Sobrang pagka-pormal.*"
9. "*Para silang nasa honor lagi.*"
10. "*Parang first honor silang lahat dun*" {exaggerated nervous expression}.

When Melai recounts, "*At tsaka yung isa (pointed at her back) … dun ako sa kabilang table umupo. Sabi niya, 'No!' Pinalipat ako dun… Sobrang pagka-pormal…,*" her storytelling does more than report an event; it performs stance and identity through a coordinated package of talk, timing, and embodiment. The quoted "*No!*" functions as a stylized enactment of authority—made more salient by the sudden shift in language choice and voice quality— while her Bisaya-accented Taglish narration frames the memory from a position of humorous distance rather than

intimidation. In multimodal terms, her pointing gesture and animated facial expression operate as contextualization cues that "re-animate" the scene, guiding the audience to interpret the moment as a comedic critique of excessive formality rather than as shame about her own accent or social position. Multimodal interaction research shows that gestures, facial expressions, prosody, and timing systematically contribute to meaning-making and action formation, shaping how narratives are socially received.

Through empowerment, this segment indexes intrapersonal empowerment, as Melai displays ease, self-efficacy, and control over the interactional framing of a potentially face-threatening experience. Llorente-Alonso et al. (2024) note that empowerment is closely tied to perceived competence and self-determination—qualities visible here in how she steers the audience toward laughter and shared understanding rather than deference. Importantly, this kind of confident, publicly valued performance matters for accent stigma: accent-linked stereotypes can be activated quickly and implicitly in listeners, shaping expectations before content is fully processed, which helps explain why accent-based prejudice can feel automatic and durable (Pélissier & Ferragne, 2021). By repeatedly pairing Bisaya-accented speech with humor, warmth, and audience alignment, Melai's talk-show interaction offers a counter-model that may soften deficit-based views of regional accents in the Philippine setting—where regional accent prejudice has been empirically documented—because it presents linguistic difference as socially connecting and legitimate rather than laughable or inferior (Quinto et al., 2024).
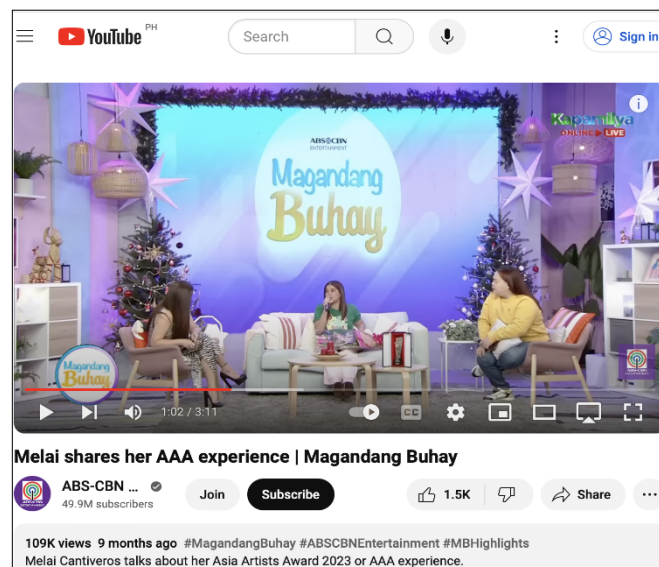


**Figure 2.** *Screenshot of Attentive and Active Listeners*

**Regine:**
**11**. "*OO! (.)*"
**12**. "*Parang ↑of course↑ kay ASIA man gyud to (.)*"
**13**. "*OO.*" {nods repeatedly}

In response to Melai's statement, Regine softly echoes and aligns with her, saying, "OO! Parang of course kay ASIA man gyud to. OO." while nodding as she speaks. This brief but emphatic agreement functions as an affirmation that she has fully understood and supports Melai's point. As a listener, Regine's utterance and accompanying nods offer interpersonal reassurance and validation, signaling that Melai's perspective and, by extension, her Bisaya-accented way of speaking, are legitimate and respected in their shared space. Rather than positioning Melai's regional accent as something laughable or inferior, Regine's supportive response creates a sense of comfort and acceptance for her co-host. This interaction reflects how positive affirmation from interlocutors can help alleviate language stigma and strengthen a speaker's sense of legitimacy and belonging in multilingual settings (McKenzie, 2010), thereby contributing to Melai's empowered stance in using her own accent on national television.

**Video 1 — Segment 4: Gratitude Speech + Humor**
**Melai:**
**1**. *"Ako (.) momshie Rej (.)"*
**2**. *"masabi ko talaga"*
**3**. *"na wala akong karapatan magkuan (.)"*
**4**. *"mag-proud-proud (.)"*
**5**. *"maghambog-hambog didto (.)"*
**6**. *"kasi si Lord talaga lahat yan nag-moves nyan."*
**7**. *"And maraming salamat sa POP Studios"*
**8**. *"at POP Live World"*
**9**. *"for giving me this (.)"*
**10**. *"an AAA and Star News of South Korea —"*
**Regine:**
**11**. <soft> *uhhhhh* </soft>
**Melai:**
**12**. *"for this award (.)"*
**13**. *"I cannot believe this (.)"*
**14**. *"Can I quit this job?"* <laugh> *hahaha* </laugh>
**Regine:**
**15**. <laugh> *hahaha* </laugh>

In one award segment, Melai playfully says, *"Ako, momshie Rej, masabi ko talaga na wala akong karapatan magkuan, mag-proud-proud, maghambog-hambog didto… kasi si Lord talaga lahat yan nag-moves nyan. And maraming salamat sa POP Studios at POP Live World for giving me this… an AAA and Star News of South Korea…"* with Regine softly murmuring *"uhhhh"* in agreement before ending with, *"…for this award. I cannot believe this. Can I quit this job?"* followed by laughter. In this sequence, Melai's diction, mixing Bisaya-inflected Filipino, English, playful reduplications (mag-proud-proud, maghambog-hambog), and casual slang, shows how she chooses words and languages that feel natural and comfortable to her while still clearly conveying gratitude and disbelief. Rather than toning down her regional accent or informal style in a formal award setting, she leans into them, transforming a potentially intimidating moment into a humorous, relatable performance. The sudden shift from heartfelt thanks to the joke *"Can I quit this job?"* introduces a comedic twist that invites shared laughter from Regine and the audience, turning the scene into a moment of bonding rather than one of distance. Humor here functions as a linguistic strategy that softens social boundaries and enhances social rapport, allowing a speaker with a marginalized accent to negotiate a more favorable, confident identity before a national audience (Jegede, 2025).

**Video 1 — Segment 5: Validation**
**Co-host:**
**1.** *"Pero thank you naman"*
**2.** *"sa karangalang binigay mo sa Pilipinas (.)"*
**3.** *"At alam naming"*
**4.** *"simula pa lang 'to"*
**5.** *"ng pag-conquer mo sa ASIA"*
**6.** *"bilang ASIA's Comedy Queen."*

In one closing remark, a co-host tells Melai, *"Pero thank you naman sa karangalang binigay mo sa Pilipinas, lalo na sa atin dito sa Magandang Buhay. At alam naming simula pa lang 'to ng pag-conquer mo sa ASIA bilang ASIA's Comedy Queen."* This utterance does more than simply praise her achievement; it actively positions Melai as someone who brings honor to the country and frames her current success as just the beginning of her wider "conquering" of Asia as a comedy queen. By publicly projecting a powerful future identity onto Melai, the co-host's words offer relational encouragement and affirmation, strengthening Melai's positive sense of self despite her heavily marked regional accent.

Such supportive communication illustrates the interactional aspect of empowerment: social relationships and enabling environments (like a warm, affirming co-host) help build and reinforce a speaker's confidence and legitimacy. At the same time, repeatedly being treated as valued and celebrated on-air contributes to the

behavioral aspect of empowerment, as Melai continues to appear, speak, and perform authentically, thereby recycling social practices that quietly resist accent-based stigma. The co-hosts' and audience's positive feedback functions as a social validation process that co-creates Melai's empowered identity rather than leaving her to construct it alone. This aligns with research showing that supportive communication can significantly enhance the interactional dimension of empowerment by helping speakers feel more confident and valued within society (Wijayanti, 2024).

**Melai:**
**7**. "*May ayy (.)*"
**8**. "*di ko lang alam kung totoo ang balita (.)*"
**9**. "*pero (.)*"
**10**. "*ayoko kasing magsalita ng tapos (.)*"
**11**. "*Gusto ko naka-hang*" <laugh> *hahaha* </laugh>
**12**. "*Hindi*" {points to audience}
**13**. "*basta balita na lang (.)*"
**14**. "*post na lang (.)*"
**15**. "*Mag-post na lang kami.*"
**16**. "*kung ano bang next journey ng 'Ma'am Chief' (.)*"
**17**. "*So (.) kuan lang (.)*"

In one segment, Melai responds to a question about her South Korea–based movie with, "*May ayy… di ko lang alam kung totoo ang balita pero… ayoko kasing magsalita ng tapos. Gusto ko naka hang. So, kuan lang, ahm stay tuned. Go with the flow,*" while smiling and making a subtly persuasive facial expression. Here, her speech is notably casual and intimate, as if she were talking to close friends rather than a mass audience, an example of an informal or casual speech style where interlocutors are treated as familiar acquaintances (Joos, 1967). Her use of fillers (e.g., "may ayy," "ahm"), term repetitions, and elliptical sentences reflects spontaneous spoken discourse, helping her maintain the floor while drawing listeners into the uncertainty and excitement of the "*hanging*" news (Delaney, 2022). Crucially, she does all this without softening or hiding her regional accent; instead, her Bisaya-inflected delivery becomes a resource for identity, consistent with work viewing accent as a key marker of social belonging rather than a deficit (Teshaboyeva & Xidirova, 2024). The combination of light humor, facial expressions, and direct address *("stay tuned, go with the flow")* gives her talk a participatory feel, using humor pro-socially to build in-group solidarity and reduce social distance between herself, her co-hosts, and the audience (Attardo, 2017). This relaxed, informal style with its repetitions, ellipses, and fillers frames the audience as close participants rather than distant strangers (Delaney, 2022), signaling a genuine self-presentation rather than a heavily scripted or "*performed*" persona, in line with views of authenticity as presenting oneself as one truly is (Bradley, n.d.; Goffman, 1959).

Notably, studies indicate that media casual speech styles enable regional speakers to be authentic and to reach the audience more naturally, thereby enhancing a positive identity positioning (Ebben & Bull, 2023). Similarly, humor has been found to assist marginalized speakers in negotiating identity, social distance, and power in dialogue (Darvin & Sun, 2024). These align with the observation that Melai uses a humorous tone and a confident accent as tools of empowerment, rather than to conceal linguistic difference. As such, the consistent maintenance of her Bisaya accent, even in high-stakes settings and within the community, indicates deliberate authenticity and communicative agency, both of which are important characteristics of empowerment processes.

The communication situation in the second video differed because Melai was the host rather than a guest. She continued to exhibit the same linguistic and behavioral patterns she had shown previously, but the subject matter was more serious: her experience with a recent medical condition. Her informal speech, capricious code-switching, Bisaya fillers, and expressive gestures were still noticeable, showing how speakers use style and language variation to project a consistent social identity across contexts (Coupland, 2007; Hall & Nilep, 2015). These aspects indicate that her speech style is not merely context-dependent but remains stable, reflecting how dialect and everyday language can function as markers of cultural and personal identity (Lakshmikantha, 2019). This stability suggests that she has a high degree of self-efficacy and feels comfortable with her linguistic identity, consistent with research linking strong efficacy beliefs to confident performance in speaking tasks (Bandura, 1977; Wang & Sun, 2024).

This uniformity is consistent with the literature on the use of code-switching and fillers as expressions of multilingual agency, which enable speakers to manage emotions, identity, and social meaning authentically (Kipchoge, 2024). Moreover, the use of an identical speech style, even in serious and vulnerable narratives, reflects a similar form of behavioral empowerment in empowerment literature, in which persons demonstrate a sense of control and order in their self-presentation (Zimmerman, 2000).

Lastly, the warm, affirming responses of Regine and Jolina, together with the audience's vocal confirmations, mirror the study's findings that positive interactional feedback can significantly strengthen minority-accented speakers' confidence in their identities and lessen the internal impact of language stigma (Wakat et al., 2023). This underscores that Melai's empowered performance is not purely self-generated but co-constructed through supportive social interaction. In the second video, the communicative context shifted, with Melai now positioned as a host rather than a guest, and the topic became more serious as she recounted a recent medical condition. However, her informal speech, fluid code-switching, Bisaya fillers, and expressive gestures remained consistent. This continuity suggests that her speech style is not merely adjusted to fit contexts but rather a stable feature of how she presents herself, indicating a strong sense of self-efficacy and comfort with her linguistic identity.

**Melai's Health Scarce Experience Shared in a Graduation-Themed Segment**
In the second video, the situation was different from the first, in which Melai was more of a guest than a host. It was shown that Melai interacted with the other hosts, Regine V. Alcasid and Jolina Magdangal. In their interaction, they discussed negative thinking. Melai shared something about her recent medical condition, which helped her get control of negative thinking, as she was able to overcome a health crisis with the help of the Lord. She casually talked about the details of her medical condition with her co-hosts. Although it was a serious topic, she still exhibited the same pattern of behavior observed in the first video.
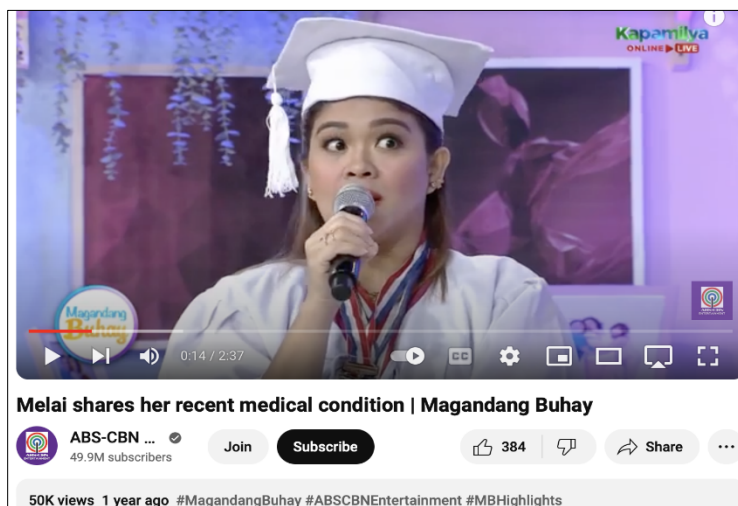
**Video 2 — Segment 1: Opening Joke**



Figure 3. *Screenshot of Melai's Facial Expression*

**Melai:**
1. "*Ako (.) momshie Jols (.) momshie Rej*" — {funny face}
2. "*kating-kati na ako dito sa —* "
3. "*yung kating-kati ka na dito sa —* "
4. "*Hindi (.) ahmmm (.)*"
5. "*Ako (.) graduate na ako sa negative thinking.*"

In one graduation-themed segment, Melai opens with a playful line to her co-hosts: "*Ako, Momshie Jols, Momshie Rej, (made a funny face) kating-kati na ako dito sa… yung kating-kati ka na dito sa… Hindi ahmmm ako, graduate na ako sa negative thinking.*" Her utterance begins with humor and a funny facial expression, then trails off with repetitions (*"kating-kati na ako dito sa…"*), ellipsis, and fillers (*"ahmmm"*) before landing on a clear, Taglish declaration that she

is *"graduate na… sa negative thinking."* Rather than stating this main point in a straightforward, formal manner, she expresses it in her usual spontaneous style, code-switching between Filipino and English while maintaining her regional Bisaya accent. This casual, unrehearsed delivery indicates that she prioritizes authentic self-expression over conformity to a standardized speech style. Even without analyzing each phoneme, the rhythm and pattern of her utterance mirror those of her Bisaya speech, demonstrating continuity in her speech style across languages. The interplay of code-switching and strategic use of fillers here functions as more than merely "messy" talk; these features serve as markers of multilingual agency that allow her to assert her identity and negotiate social meaning before a national audience (Mona, 2024).

**Regine:**
**6**. *"Buntis ka?"* {serious}

**Melai:**
**7**. *"Hindi uy! Buang*!" {quick, loud}
**8**. *"Di ba ba − ba −* " <laugh> *hahaha* </laugh>

**Jolina:**
**9**. *"Uy! Sinabihan si momshie Rej ng 'BUANG'!"*
**10**. <laugh> *hahaha* </laugh> {Melai hugs Regine}

In one lighthearted exchange, Regine asks Melai, *"Buntis ka?"* in a serious, curious tone, and Melai instantly fires back with a typical Bisaya-style exaggerated denial: *"HINDI UY! BUANG! Di, ba babaHahahaah,"* prompting Jolina to tease, *"Uy! Sinabihan si Momshie Rej 'buang' HAHAHAHAH,"* as they all laugh and Melai hugs Regine. The rapid back-and-forth, shared laughter, and physical affection show an interactional rhythm grounded in familiarity and trust rather than offense. For Bisaya speakers, expressions such as "HINDI UY! BUANG!" are often heard as playful and affectionate rather than insulting, and Regine (herself Bisaya) and Jolina clearly treat them that way. This scene suggests that Melai's thick regional accent and Bisaya pragmatic style are not only tolerated but actively embraced by the group, reinforcing her sense of acceptance rather than stigma. Such casually spoken interaction on television helps construct authenticity and fosters identification among audiences who share similar linguistic backgrounds (Mahboob & Cruz, 2013). Moreover, research on accent bias indicates that positive listener attitudes and warm responses can significantly weaken the negative impact of linguistic stigma and enhance a speaker's feeling of belonging (Fuse et al., 2023). At this moment, the co-hosts' supportive, joking engagement serves as a form of social validation that reinforces Melai's empowered stance toward her Bisaya identity.

**Video 2 — Segment 2: Miracle Story**
**Melai:**
**1**. *"Hindi (.)"*
**2**. *"kasi isa 'to sa miracle talaga sa buhay ko −* "
**3**. *"na masasabi ko talagang (.)"*
**4**. *"ahhh (.) max miracle talaga."*
**5**. *"Kasi parang nagkaroon ako ng bukol dito"*
**6**. *"sa may boobs"* {points to chest}.
**Melai:**
**7**. *"So hindi talaga 'to alam (.)"*
**8**. *"ngayon ko lang sasabihin (.)"*
**9**. *"Hindi rin alam ng family ko"* {soft voice}.
**Melai:**
**10**. *"Nung nag-vacation ako ng Cebu −* "
**11**. *"dun ko talaga ginol"*
**12**. *"na mapuntahan lahat ng miracle churches −* "
**13**. *"Yes! Dun ako nag-pray (.)"*
**14**. *"Grabe"* {emotional tone}.

Sharing a health scare on-air, Melai narrates, *"Isa 'to sa miracle sa buhay ko… nagkaroon ako ng bukol dito sa may boobs. Iba kasi yung bukol, matigas talaga. Sabi ko, 'My God, Lord,' pinag-pray ko na lang. Dapat magpapa-checkup na ako pagkatapos ng cycle na 'to pero sabi ko, 'Lord, ikaw na bahala, hindi na ako mag-iisip, kahit ang daming negative na*

*pumapasok baka kung ano mangyari, kawawa yung mga anak ko.' Alam mo, in Jesus' name, nawala. Grabe talaga si Lord, kaya simula ngayon hindi na ako mag-iisip ng negative kasi alam ko, si Lord nandiyan."* Even while recounting a serious and emotional experience, she maintains the same casual, conversational speech style seen in her other utterances using ellipsis, fillers, direct address to "*Lord*," and spontaneous phrasing rather than a polished or scripted narrative. Her body language and tone match this informality, signaling comfort and confidence in speaking from the heart with her regional accent intact. There is no attempt to "upgrade" her speech to a more formal or standardized variety despite the seriousness of the topic; instead, she talks to her co-hosts and the audience as if they were close friends, without any trace of disrespect. This consistency of style across light and heavy topics underscores the genuineness of her self-presentation. In this sense, her emotionally open testimony delivered in her own accent, rhythm, and religious framing can be read as an empowered identity performance, where authenticity and emotional transparency become central resources for a marginalized speaker to claim space and legitimacy in public discourse (Burgos et al., 2024).

**Video 2 — Segment 4: Co-constructed Empowerment**



**Figure 4.** *Screenshot of the Listeners' Reactions Towards Melai's Speech*

**Regine:**
**1.** *"That is one of the qualities"*
**2**. *"that we love about you —"*
**3**. *"your faith."*

**Audience:**
**4**. *"We love you, Momshie Mel!"* {shouts, applause}

After Melai shares her healing experience, Regine responds, *"That is one of the qualities that we love about you. It is your faith,"* and the audience follows with a heartfelt, *"We love you, Momshie Mel!"* shouted in unison. These reactions from both the co-host and the audience demonstrate a high level of social support and emotional validation in response to Melai's story. Despite her informal speech style, regional accent, and frequent code-switching, the communicative space around her remains warm, reassuring, and nonjudgmental. Such affirming interactional responses play a crucial role in shaping empowered identity performance: they show that her way of speaking is not an obstacle to being respected and loved, but an entirely accepted part of who she is. This aligns with research indicating that positive audience reception can significantly reduce the negative impacts of linguistic stigma and increase minority-accented speakers' confidence and perceived social inclusion (Yan, 2024). Likewise,

supportive feedback from interlocutors helps legitimize interactional empowerment, confirming the speaker's sense of social value and agency within the communicative encounter (Lee, 2014).

Since Melai was given the chance to express her true self, she was provided with a socially safe environment, not ridicule or correction, and she received instant affirmation. This pertains to the interactional aspect of empowerment, in which a person's agency is co-created through encouragement, empathy, and shared meaning-making in communication (Kabeer, 1999; Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Sidle, 2019). This reassurance from peers and the audience allows her to remain true to herself in her self-presentation, aligning with views of identity as something produced relationally through interaction rather than as a fixed inner essence (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Such supportive interaction is a critical resource for resisting accent-based stigma and its adverse effects on confidence and participation (Yan, 2024; Sumantry & Choma, 2021).

**Summary of Discussion**
Discrimination against accents remains prevalent in multilingual societies, particularly against individuals with strong regional accents. Nonetheless, Melai Cantiveros-Francisco offers another account of events — an account that turns linguistic stigma into power. The results indicate that her authenticity is a key element of identity empowerment, the antithesis of discrimination on the basis of accent. This empowerment not only entails my personal confidence but also a multidimensional process involving self-perception, social validation, and behavioral consistency (Zimmerman, 2000).

At the interpersonal level, Melai's speech style, tone, and natural body language demonstrated her confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The regularity of Bisaya fillers (e.g., *kuan*), spontaneous code-switching, and informal humor suggest that she is self-conscious and does not want to adhere to fixed language standards, instead using linguistic resources to actively position herself in interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). These trends demonstrate empowerment, in the form of self-belief and agency, through her communicative identity (Bandura, 1997; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Rather than attempting to conceal her accent, Melai uses it as a marker of uniqueness and authenticity in contexts where accents like hers are often stigmatized (Goffman, 1963; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Lippi-Green, 1997).

At the interactional level, she is empowered by her active engagement with the audience and co-hosts. The socially supportive atmosphere Melai adopts, fostered by the welcoming and affirming responses of colleagues such as Regine Velasquez-Alcasid and Jolina Magdangal, strengthens Melai's agency. Empowerment Theory posits that social relationships and validation are factors in maintaining confidence (Zimmerman, 2000). These interactions demonstrate that empowerment is not only constructed through communication but also cultivated through interaction, empathy, and mutual respect.

At the behavioral level, Melai's authenticity across different social environments demonstrates a sense of empowerment. Her attitude remains sincere, confident, and openhearted, though she shifts between serious and comedic moments. This continuity of behavior supports Stangor and Walinga's (2014) claim that personality manifests as stable behavior. Therefore, empowerment is not merely a belief to be internalized, but an ongoing and feasible form of communication that is not subordinate to language.

Together, these dimensions show how Empowerment Theory can be used to explain accent stigma as an opportunity to act and resist rather than suffer disadvantage. Melai's communicative behavior illustrates how empowerment can transform discrimination into visibility, authenticity, and power. Her linguistic diversity and unapologetic self-presentation disrupt the prevalence of standardized speech, asserting that empowerment may be both individual and social, a process of reclaiming voice in a stigmatized linguistic environment.

## Conclusion
This paper re-extends the analysis of accents not merely as stigma, but also as a site of interaction on which agency and legitimacy can be publicly articulated. Using the Empowerment Theory in the televised discourse of Melai Cantiveros-Francisco, the paper expands the body of empowerment to a sociolinguistic investigation by conceptualizing empowerment as communicative practice, which is undertaken through the strategic framing of meaning through the stance-taking and self-positioning of the self in mainstream Filipino media practices (Zimmerman, 2000). The study is methodologically sound in that it illustrates the power of discourse analysis,

which combines linguistic and non-linguistic resources, and how accent retention, use of code, humor, timing, and embodied cues (e.g., gesture and facial expression) interact with each other to communicate authenticity and confidence and to elicit supportive uptake among co-participants. In effect, the analysis highlights how media influence attitudes toward language: when the regional accent is depicted as reliable, friendly, and establishmentally fulfilling, rather than as inadequate, televised interaction can challenge deficit-based language ideologies and help to normalize linguistic diversity in social life. Future studies can expand the dataset on media genres and platforms and incorporate audience reception data (e.g., comments or interviews) to more adequately interpret the efficacy of empowered accent performances in shaping perceptions of regional accents, identity, and inclusion in the Philippine context.

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