

LESSON 18

Mga Talang Pangkultura: Flexibility of Meaning

When invited to a party or an event, a Filipino might say **sigé** (okay) or **susubukan ko** (I will try), or **pipilitin ko** (I will exert a lot of effort), without any intention of going. The word **sigé** has no direct translation, but can be roughly translated to “okay,” and is a more common response than the more direct **oo** (yes). However, **sigé** can be mistranslated by Filipinos themselves using “yes” and will utter the word “yes” to a foreigner, when in fact they mean **sigé**.

These observations—of “yes” meaning “no”—is affirmed by numerous articles that discuss the confusion that comes from the Filipino’s inconclusive way of speaking. France Vianna, of *Filipinas* magazine, writes:

The most common misunderstanding between a Westerner and a Filipino is the latter’s use of the word “yes.” When invited to an event, a Filipino will easily say “yes” even if he has no intention of going—to save the inviter’s face. A Filipino “yes” may mean “I’ll try; I don’t know; I don’t want to talk about it any more,” or even “no”—all depending on the situation. In the workplace or in social organizations, he will not voice a contradictory opinion directly; instead, he will rephrase his opinion as a question or just keep silent.

Similarly, an article entitled “Filipino Business Norms, Etiquette and Style” by Clarence Henderson of Henderson Consulting International, talks about “yes” meaning “maybe” or “no.”

For example, when a Filipino executive feels that telling the truth might embarrass or offend, he or she will often beat around the bush. In this context, “yes” doesn’t necessarily mean “yes.” The word “yes” could also mean “maybe,” “I guess that’s what you want to hear,” “Perhaps someday,” “I have no idea,” or “No.” There are, of course, a wide array of subtle cues to the real meaning, some nonverbal and some in Tagalog. For example, the word **mamaya** implies “later today,” while **saka na** means more like “sometime later, maybe tomorrow, maybe next month, or next year ...”

In his article, “Indigenous Philippine Psychology: Methodological Considerations,” Timothy Church notes that even the reliability of questionnaires and surveys have been affected because “the Filipino emphasis on **pakikisama** or smooth personal relations makes them prone to give answers experimenters expect or desire, and to be loath to use the lower end of evaluation scales” (e.g. Lynch, 1973a in Church 306) Church explains this further (306):

Similarly, questionnaire surveys can be confounded by a Filipino tendency or say “yes” rather than “no.” Some empirical support for such response tendencies is provided by Sechrest, Fay, Zaide, and Flores (1973) and Arkoff Thaver and Elkind 1966) who found a greater tendency among Americans to disagree with questionnaire items than Filipinos.

So next time you speak to a Filipino and he says “yes,” make sure it really is a “yes.”