

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Epilepsy in Philippine language and dialects

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### Abstract

In the Philippines, English and Filipino (standardized Tagalog) are widely used for media and education. “Epilepsy” and “kumbulsyon” are commonly used terms; “epilepsy” carries a negative connotation based on a local unpublished epilepsy knowledge, attitude and perception survey. Several popular dialects have epilepsy names (*patol* in Cebuano, *kuyap* in Ilonggo, *bontog* in Bicolano, *kissiw* in Ilocano) but most are descriptions of the convulsive attack. Labels for persons with epilepsy also exist (*bontogon*, *kuyapon*, epileptic).

### INTRODUCTION

Epilepsy has been many called many names from ancient times - from “sacred disease” in ancient times to “falling sickness” in Shakespeare’s literary works. The word “epilepsy” originated from the Greek word *epileplambanein* which means “to take hold of”, “to attack” or “to seize”. It was converted to Latin as “*epilepsia*” and later in French, “*epilepsie*”. The word has been anglicized to “epilepsy” and this has been used ever since, in many parts of our predominantly English-speaking world. The word by itself contains a hint of stigma as it implies a condition where one loses control of himself and is overtaken by a force beyond its own- supernatural or mental, sacred or evil.

In the Philippines, where English is one of two official languages, “epilepsy” is commonly used to refer to the condition and “epileptic” for a person with epilepsy, especially in urbanized and educated populations. Whereas “convulsions” and “seizures” elicit a mild reaction in clinic consults. The mention of the word “epilepsy” in the diagnosis provokes a stronger negative reaction from patients and their families. To many Filipinos the word “epilepsy” is associated with chronicity, incurability and psychosis or mental illness.

In an unpublished survey of 120 Filipinos done by Cabral –Lim L, Gutierrez JC, Paragua H. in 2001 in a public knowledge, attitude and perception survey before the launch of the “Epilepsy: Out of the Shadows” campaign in the Philippines, about 80% of subjects have used or

heard of the word “epilepsy”. Around 23% believe persons with epilepsy are mentally ill, and 11.7% think it is a contagious disorder. Many believe that the froth of saliva during a convulsion is contagious, much like rabies. Only 52.5% of the subjects believe epilepsy can be treated. Although almost all of them will befriend or allow their families to mingle with people with epilepsy, only 41.7% will marry or allow their children to marry someone with epilepsy.

### WORDS USED IN EPILEPSY IN TAGALOG

The Philippines is an archipelago or 7000 or so islands, divided into three major island groups namely Luzon (North), Visayas (Central) and Mindanao (South). According to McFarland<sup>1</sup>, there are 120 and 175 languages in the Philippines, depending on the classification. Basic English is generally understood all around the Philippines as it is the preferred language in print and broadcast media, business and legal circles, and is the medium of instruction in school. The other official language is Filipino, which is largely a standardized version of the Tagalog dialect, a dialect widely used in many provinces of Luzon.

In 1964, Gamez and Escueta published an original article entitled “Epilepsy in the Philippines” in the Journal of Medicine (Philippines). This pioneering descriptive study of 760 patients with seizures seen in their private clinics in the capital city of Manila from 1956-63, detailed various aspects of epilepsy

from classification, etiology and health seeking behaviors. It included an interesting section on the usage of Tagalog words to describe the various types of seizures, which is worth reproducing as below. I have put in the English translations in parenthesis.

#### “THE TAGALOG SCENE

Very often, the initial difficulty which besets a physician practicing in the local scene is the problem of language. Not only has he not been trained to think of chief complaints verbalized in the Filipino language but he has also not been oriented as to what is usually meant by provincial Tagalog terms in the light of probable convulsive seizures.

The 769 cases of convulsive seizures met during the last seven years have familiarized us with ordinary Tagalog terms; we have learned to associate them with the varieties of convulsive seizures. Without attempting to formulate our own occupational vocabulary for Filipino we hope the following shall be of help to the physician who deals with convulsions at the Tagalog scene.

The Tagalog usually verbalizes:

A. The Grand Mal in terms of *hinihimatay* (to lose consciousness), *kumikisay* (to go into muscle twitches or jerks), *inatake/sinusumpong* (to have an attack), *kinukumbulsyon* (to have convulsions).

B. The Petit Mal attacks as *tigil*, or *natitigilan* (to freeze), *napapatanga* (to stare or look dumbfounded), *tanga daw sa klase* (dumb in class), *tulala* (to stare), *di mapag-aral ng mabuti* (unable to do well in school), *kumukurap ang mga mata* (to flicker eyes).

C. The myoclonic attacks as *nagugulat* or *magugulatin* (to startle easily), *natatakot* (to be afraid), *nagigitla* (to startle), *biglang nalulupasay sa daan* (to drop and flail arms by the roadside), *nawawalan ng lakas ang mga paa* (to lose muscle tone of the legs), *biglang natutumba or tumutumba* (to fall suddenly).

D. The temporal lobe seizures as *malilimutin* (forgetful), *wala sa sarili* (out of his mind), *binabangugot* (to have nightmares), *nalilito* (confused), *nalolokong parang bata* (to act crazy like a child).

E. Focal seizures either sensory or motor as: *pasmado* (cramps or tremors), *napapasma ang mga kamay o ang paa* (cramps or tremors of hands or feet).”

As shown, almost all the words used in Tagalog are not epilepsy equivalents but are descriptions of physical events or symptomatology during a seizure. Most of them are generic and may refer to a condition other than epilepsy. For example, “*himatay*” refers to loss of consciousness which can also be used for syncope; “*pasmado*” refers to any discomfort of the limbs and may be used for cramps, spasms, paresthesias or tremors. It is understood that these descriptions have to be placed in context of the temporal profile of epilepsy. Nevertheless, Gamez and Escueta showed the importance of relating the words in the local dialect to concepts of modern medicine like seizure types in the then existing epilepsy classification.

#### WORDS IN EPILEPSY USED IN OTHER PHILIPPINE LANGUAGE AND DIALECTS

In other regions in the Philippines, there are several dialects spoken. Based on the number of speakers, the most popular dialects next to Tagalog are Cebuano, Ilocano, Hiligaynon (Ilonggo), Waray-waray, Kapampangan, Bicolano and Pangasinense, in decreasing order. Equivalents of the word “epilepsy” are quite diverse. (see Table 1)

Most of the words used are based on the description of a convulsive attack for this is what the laymen easily identify as seizures or epilepsy – to stiffen, to twitch or convulse or to shake, to fall and lose consciousness. Some words are interesting in that they refer to the recurrent and paroxysmal nature of epilepsy like “*subi-subi*” (something that comes and goes). Very few words are overtly stigmatizing like “*gi-baboy*” (*baboy* = pig; *gi-baboy* = seized like a mad pig) and “*baboyon*” referring to a person with epilepsy. “*Kisay*” or “*nangingisay*” depicts an exaggerated muscle twitching or stiff shaking in someone who is near death, often eliciting laughter when used. None of the words refer to a disorder of the brain. Labels for persons with epilepsy other than the word “epileptic” are “*patolon*” in Cebuano, “*bontogon*” in Waray and Bicolano and “*kuyapon*” in Hiligaynon/ Ilonggo.

As we broaden our reach in the Philippine Epilepsy Campaign and penetrate far flung areas of the country with our strategies for epilepsy education and improving epilepsy care, familiarization with epilepsy word equivalents becomes a necessity. Words that stigmatize must be identified and corrected. Permanent labeling of persons with epilepsy need to be discouraged.

**Table 1: The epilepsy in some Philippine language and dialects**

Dialect	Regions where spoken	Epilepsy word equivalent	Description/definition
Tagalog	Most of Luzon and northern Visayas	<i>kumbulsyon</i>	generalized convulsions upward rolling of eyeballs to twitch or convulse
		<i>tirik</i> <i>kisay</i>	
	Quezon	<i>nangangaligkig</i> <i>nangingisay</i> <i>subi-subi</i>	both words mean to shake or convulse to have repeated attacks
Kapampangan	Pampanga	<i>kumbulsyon</i> <i>soning</i> <i>sosoning</i>	generalized convulsions having seizures person with epilepsy
Cebuano	Some parts of Visayas and certain parts of Mindanao	<i>patol</i> <i>patolon</i> <i>gi-baboy</i> <i>baboyon</i>	muscle twitching, shaking person with epilepsy seizing like a mad pig refers to a pig that has gone mad; person with epilepsy
		<i>kirig-kirig</i>	to shake or twitch repetitively
Ilocano	Ilocos, Cagayan (Northern Luzon)	<i>kissiw</i> <i>kulip-patay</i>	to convulse to repeatedly lose consciousness
Hiligaynon	Iloilo, Bacolod, Mindoro Western Visayas	<i>kuyap</i> <i>kuyapom</i>	to fall and twitch or shake person with epilepsy
Waray-waray	Leyte, Samar	<i>buntog</i> <i>buntogon</i>	attacks of shaking and loss of consciousness person with epilepsy
Bicolano	Bicol region	<i>kumbulsyon</i> <i>subi-subi</i>	generalized convulsions to have something that comes and goes convulsion; epilepsy person with epilepsy
	Bicol (Sorsogon)	<i>bontog</i> <i>bontogon</i>	
Pangasinense	Pangasinan	<i>nampatal-ker</i>	to stiffen
Ifugao	Ifugao, Cagayan province	<i>mun-orchah</i>	having seizures
		<i>kimmudhol</i>	to stiffen
		<i>tumangken</i>	to stiffen

In the local setting, the English word “epilepsy” is widely used and carries with it the same negative connotation it has in other cultures. Although the rich variety of Filipino dialects rarely use stigmatizing word equivalents, the other words used as descriptions of the convulsive attacks and the picture they paint is nonetheless stigmatizing.

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