SYNTACTIC CATEGORIES IN TAGALOG

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Professor Kenneth Pike, in his plenary lecture "Matrix Formatives in N-Dimensional Linguistics", spoke of the "Eurocentrism" of linguistics. A vivid example of such Eurocentrism is provided by various descriptions and analyses of clause structure in Tagalog. Thus Pilipino schoolchildren learn from their grammar books that Tagalog sentences are of the form subject-copula-verb -- in other words, just like their English counterparts. Alas, it is hard to imagine a more unwarranted imposition of one language's structure upon that of another than is evident in such a statement.

Most linguists now recognize that Tagalog differs from English at least with respect to its basic word order, which is verb-initial: various subject-initial constructions, in which the copula ay is inserted, are generally considered to be more highly marked variants. Moreover, it is often observed that Tagalog differs from English also with respect to its inventory of grammatical relations; thus, Schachter (1976, 1977), Gil (1984) and others argue that Tagalog has neither subjects nor direct objects, its basic sentence structure consisting of a verb followed by a string of nominals. Such descriptions go some of the way toward freeing the study of Tagalog from its Eurocentric shackles -- but they do not go far enough.

In this paper, I suggest that Tagalog differs from English and other European languages more radically than is generally supposed: not only with respect to its basic word order and its inventory of grammatical relations but also with respect to its inventory of syntactic categories, or "parts of speech". Specifically, I propose that Tagalog possesses but a single open syntactic category. In other words, Tagalog does not distinguish between categories such as noun, adjective, verb and sentence, nor does it distinguish between lexical categories and their phrasal

\[1\text{In addition to a single open syntactic category, Tagalog also possesses a closed syntactic category of clitics characteristically occurring in Wackernagel's sentence-second position. Whether Tagalog has additional closed syntactic categories must remain open to future investigation.}\]
projections, that is to say between nouns and noun-phrases, adjectives and adjective-phrases, verbs and verb-phrases, and so forth. In the absence of familiar distinctions such as noun/adjective, noun/verb, and so forth, a new term is needed to denote the single undifferentiated open syntactic category of Tagalog. An opportunity hereby presents itself to redress the Greek and Latin bias of linguistic terminology. Accordingly, I propose the Tagalog term parírala "phrase" to denote the single open syntactic category of Tagalog, and, more generally, any open syntactic category that is the only such category in its language.

Any discussion of syntactic categories must be based on a clear understanding of what a syntactic category actually is. By "syntactic category" I shall mean a set of words or phrases exhibiting similar syntactic behaviour. In many instances, members of a syntactic category may also share morphological and/or semantic properties; however, the existence of a syntactic category can only be supported on syntactic grounds. Ideally, a syntactic category will be associated with a substantial array of syntactic rules and principles, each of which applies to every member of the syntactic category in question and to no members of any other syntactic categories. In reality, however, syntactic categories generally contain prototypical members, to which all the relevant rules and principles apply, and also less prototypical members, to which some of the rules and principles may fail to apply. Thus, the viability of a syntactic category is proportionate to the number of rules and principles that make reference to it, and the degree to which these rules and principles apply to coextensive sets.

Thus, in order to show that Tagalog has a single open syntactic category, parírala, it is necessary to demonstrate that there exists no set of syntactic rules and principles converging to define any of the familiar syntactic categories, noun, adjective, verb, and so forth, or any other syntactic category consisting of a proper subset of all words and phrases in Tagalog. Claims of non-existence are risky propositions: one has to look everywhere to be absolutely certain that what one seeks does not exist. I have not looked everywhere

²A number of scholars, for example Schachter and Otanes (1972), Gil (1982, chapter 6), and Shkarban (1992), have claimed that various syntactic categories are less readily differentiated in Tagalog than in other languages. The present claim is more far-reaching in that it expressly denies the viability of such categories altogether.
-- and even if I had, considerations of space would have
prevented me from reporting on this here. However,
have looked in what I consider to be some of the more
likely places, and found no evidence whatsoever for
distinguishing between two or more open syntactic
categories in Tagalog. I therefore offer the claim that
Tagalog has a single open syntactic category, parírala
as an interim conclusion, to be supported or perhaps
modified by future investigation.

The extent to which Tagalog syntax is unlike that of
English and other European languages is perhaps most
evident in live texts. The following passage from the
newspaper Balita (18.7.1990, p.2) reports on the rescue
operations following a devastating earthquake:

(1) Sampung "Huey" transport helicopters ang pina-
kahapon sa Central at Northern Luzon sa utos ni Air
Force chief Maj. Gen. Gerardo Protacio, para
 tumulong sa paghahanap at pagliligta sa mga biktima
ng lindol. Siyam na helicopter mula sa Visayas at
Bicol region ang tutulong din sa malawak na rescue
operation.

ten-LIG Huey transport helicopters TOP IA:PT:PFV-go yesterday
OBL Central and Northern Luzon OBL command PERS:DIR Air Force
chief Maj. Gen. Gerardo Protacio, for AT:INF-assist OBL GER
search and GER-free OBL PL victim DIR earthquake. nine LIG
helicopter from OBL Visayas and Bicol region TOP AT:IPFV
assist too OBL extensive LIG rescue operation.
"Ten "Huey" transport helicopters were sent
yesterday to Central and Northern Luzon by command
of Air Force chief Maj. Gen. Gerardo Protacio, to
assist in the searching and freeing of the victims
of the earthquake. Nine helicopters from the
Visayas and Bicol region will assist too in the
extensive rescue operation."

As evidenced by the morpheme-by-morpheme gloss and
subsequent translation, the Tagalog passage can be
rendered into grammatical English in such a way that the
linear order of the major lexical items in Tagalog is
perfectly preserved in the English translation.
Nevertheless, in spite of such superficial similarity,
the syntactic structures of the Tagalog passage and its

3In the morpheme-by-morpheme glosses provided in this paper, the
following abbreviations are used: AT "actor topic"; DIR "direct-
(case)"; DT "direction topic"; GER "gerund"; IA "indirect action"
INF "infinitive"; IPFV "imperfective"; IT "instrumental topic"; LIG
"ligature"; LT "locative topic"; OBL "oblique"; PERS "personal"
PFV "perfective"; PL "plural"; PT "patient topic"; SG "singular"
STAT "stative"; TOP "topic"; 1 "first person".
English translation could not be more different. In traditional terms, the first sentence would be analyzed as consisting of a nominal predicate *Sampung "Huey" transport helicopters "Ten "Huey" transport helicopters*, plus a topic phrase, marked with *ang*, comprising the remainder of the sentence, and headed by a nominalized verbal form *pinapunta "were sent"*. A similar analysis would be proposed for the second sentence as well. Thus, unlike the English translation, the Tagalog passage appears to display a highly marked construction, in which a nominal phrase functions as predicate, while a verbal complex plays the role of argument. However, the most cursory examination of Tagalog texts, written and spoken, reveals that such constructions are widespread and natural, thereby belying their traditional characterization as more highly marked.

The prevalence of such constructions can be readily explained by abandoning the assumption that Tagalog contains two major syntactic categories: verbs, or verb phrases, typically occurring in predicate position, and nouns, or noun phrases, characteristically occurring in argument position. In general, the primary motivation for syntactic categories is distributional. Thus, in English, verb phrases are what combine with noun phrases to produce sentences: a verb phrase cannot occur in a noun phrase position, and a noun phrase cannot occur in a verb phrase position. However, in Tagalog, there seem to be no such distributional constraints. Rather, the following generalization appears to hold: *anything can go anywhere*. Hence, in the absence of any constraints on the distribution of words and phrases in Tagalog, there is no reason to posit more than a single open syntactic category, namely, *parirala*.

Evidence for the claim that anything can go anywhere is presented in examples (2) - (5) below, illustrating some of the most basic construction types in Tagalog. Examples (2) - (5) provide templates into which words or phrases may be inserted. Under each template, examples are provided of words traditionally assumed to belong to different syntactic categories; these are marked as "E-nouns", "E-verbs" and "E-adjectives" respectively, where the prefix "E-" stands for "English". That is to say,

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4Often, such constructions are translated into English with a cleft construction, for example "It was ten "Huey" transport helicopters that were sent ...". However, such a translation is clearly inappropriate in the present context, thereby casting doubt on the traditional characterization of the Tagalog construction as consisting of predicate followed by *ang*-marked topic argument.