Tagalog: a null subject language with variant morphology

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0. Introduction

In this paper we will show that Tagalog has a fairly rich but mixed morphology yet it licenses Null Subjects. This outcome is not predicted by any of the current theories of the Null Subject Parameter as formulated within the Government-Binding paradigm. Some possible explanations for this phenomenon will be proposed. Additionally some doubt will be raised concerning the traditional view toward verbless sentences in Tagalog being simply the lack of *copula be*.

1. Language overview

Tagalog is a member of the Philippine group of Austronesian languages. It is a configurational[2] language based on the topic-comment structure. The unmarked order is comment-topic (comment, topic marker, topic) but topic-comment order (topic marker, topic, optional ligature[3], comment) is also common. Both the topic and the comment can be [±verbal], where [-verbal] is a nominal, adjectival, prepositional, existential, or adverbial phrase. All combinations of the above are possible yielding the following four sentence structures.[4]

Verbal Comment	+	Verbal Topic
Verbal Comment	+	Verbless Topic
Verbless Comment	+	Verbal Topic
Verbless Comment	+	Verbless Topic

Verbs in Tagalog are inflected for focus and aspect but not for tense, person or gender. Inflection is accomplished by both affixes and reduplication. Affixes can be prefixes

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(indicated by X-), infixes (-X-) or suffixes (-X). The focus forms are for actor, goal, benefactor, location and instrument. The inflectional system allows just about any constituent to be the focus. Following are some examples of inflection for focus. The *stems* of the verbs are in reality nouns (e.g., **bili** means the price (paid for something) and **linis** means cleanliness).

1.1. Focus

The actor may be put into focus (AF[5]) by using the **-um-** (internal to the actor) or **mag-** (external to the actor) form,

(1)   **B-um-ili siya   ng tinapay.**
       AF price him/her of bread.
       She bought bread.
       (Translating with the topic first).

This sentence could also be translated as *she (usually) buys bread* because the **-um-** form uses the same inflection for the infinitive and the completed aspect.

(2)   **Mag-bili   siya ng tinapay.**
       AF price him/her of bread.
       She sells bread.

The topic (TOP) is marked by either **ang** for common nouns or **si** for proper nouns,

(3)   **T-um-akbo si   John.**
       AF ran TOP John.
       John ran.

To put the goal (object or direction) in focus (GF), the **-in** or **i-** form is used,

(4)   **Bil(h) - in   sila ang tinapay.**[6]
       Bought GF they TOP bread.
       The bread was purchased by them.

1.2. Aspect

The aspectual forms are infinitive, contemplated, perfective (completed) and imperfective (incompleted). Some verbs also have a recently completed form. The only agreement is optional inflection for plural subjects for a few verbs (this is plural vs. singular, there is no inflection for person). For instance, the base **aral**, *study*, can be inflected for infinitive form by using the affix **mag-**, producing:

(5)   **Kailangan ko ang mag-aral.**
        Need   I TOP INF study.
        I need to study.

With the optional plural form it becomes,

(6)   **Kailangan nila ang mag-sipag-aral.**
        Need   they TOP INF PLURAL study.
        They need to study.

The contemplated (CA) form is accomplished by reduplicating the first syllable (in this case just the vowel),

(7)   **Mag-a-aral   ako mamaya.**
        AF CA study I later.
        I will study later.

The imperfective (IA) form changes the **mag** to **nag** and reduplicates,

(8)   **Nag-a-aral   sila sa aklatan.**
        AF-IA study they at library.
        They are studying at the library.

The perfective (PA) form uses **nag** and no duplication,

(9)   **Nag-aral   na ako.**
        AF-PA Study already I.
        I already studied.

The infinitive form is also used for general imperatives,

(10)   **K-um-ain ka.**
        INF eat   you.
        (you) eat.

for hortatives,

(11) **K-um-ain tayo.**
INF eat   we (inclusive).
Let's eat.

and optatives,

(12) **K-um-ain kaya ng luya   ang tatay.**
Eat   perhaps of ginger TOP father.
Perhaps father should eat the ginger.

The base form, as well as being a noun, is used for immediate imperatives (the type you'd give a child after a couple of general imperatives proved unsuccessful),

(13) **Kain na!**
Eat some (now)!

The above examples have shown that Tagalog's morphology is fairly *rich*. In some ways it is complex, being inflected for a variety of different categories yet there is no tense or agreement for person or gender. **-um-,** is used for two different aspects, the infinitive is used for a number of different purposes and even uninflected nouns can be used as verbs. Jaeggli and Safir (1989:30) state that in order for a language to be a Null Subject Language it must be morphologically uniform, that is, either all of its forms are morphologically complex, or none of them are. So far, the deviations of Tagalog have been marginally non-uniform. The rest of this paper will give evidence that is more radical.

2. Pseudo-verbs and statives

Schachter and Otanes (1972: 261) list **kailangan, ayaw, gusto** and five other *adjectives* as pseudo-verbs. Some of these pseudo-verbs have meanings similar to English modals (can, should, might, may) and like modals do not inflect at all. However, unlike modals these words are the only verb-like word needed in a sentence. If we accept these words as verbs then the uniformity of Tagalog morphology is sacrificed. If we don't accept them as verbs then the variety of verbless sentences increases well beyond *copula be* as the following examples show.