

THE INTERPRETATION OF POTENTIAL ACTION IN BIKOL VERBS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bikol is spoken by about three million speakers in the Philippines. The region, noted for its wide dialectal variation, comprises six provinces on the southern-most extension of the island of Luzon. The dialect discussed here is that of Naga City and is representative of the standard dialect of the region.

The verbs in Bikol, as in many other Philippine languages, take two general sets of affixes, one set which denotes a case relationship between the verb and the subject phrase of the sentence, and another set which adds a further semantic dimension to the meaning of the sentence (Blake 1925:38ff; Bloomfield 1917:402ff; McKaughan 1958:26ff). The first set may be referred to as 'case' affixes, and the second as 'semantic' (Mintz 1973). Semantic affixes can only occur in addition to or in combination with the case affixes, never alone. The semantic affix which is the subject of this paper is potential action.¹

Potential action affixes mark any action which has the potential of occurrence, whether that potential is volitional or nonvolitional. Nonvolitional actions are unplanned, mistakenly performed, or thwarted due to some physical short-coming on the part of the agent. If the result obtained is not that intended by the agent, or is not associated directly with the actions of an agent, the action may be said to be

nonvolitional. Volitional actions are more than deliberate. They require some special aptitude on the part of the agent. In Bikol, both volitional and nonvolitional potential actions are shown by the same semantic affix.

Potential action is an attribute of the speaker toward the agent and the action. If a speaker feels that an action is more, or less, than deliberate, he can use the potential action affix. The form of the affix alone indicates a deliberate-potential action distinction. Is the speaker correct in his assumption? If the speaker and the agent are the same, barring any attempt at irony or falsification, then we can assume that he is correct since the attributions are to his own actions. If the listener and the agent are the same, then the listener can validate or invalidate the use of potential action when he becomes the speaker. But if neither the speaker nor the listener is the agent, then the validity of the use of potential action must be based on shared speaker-listener experience and on an understanding of the agent and the nature of the action.

This mutual understanding is not only limited to situations where neither the speaker nor the listener is the agent of the action. The interpretation of volitional or nonvolitional action within the sphere of potential action must be also based on shared speaker-listener experience when the speaker himself is the agent of the action. If this were not the case, a speaker could not be sure his listener was interpreting the action correctly.

How volitional and nonvolitional actions are distinguished is the subject of this paper. The study opens with a presentation of the case affixes which, affixed singly to a verb base, indicate simple, deliberate actions. Following this is a brief outline of tense forms. This is to facilitate the recognition of verb forms used in example sentences. Next is a presentation of the potential action affixes in both their neutral, or infinitive, and inflected forms. The rest of the paper is divided into a comparison between potential and deliberate actions, and volitional and nonvolitional potential actions.

2. AFFIX FORMS

2.1. CASE AFFIXES

There are four case affix forms in Bikol: #mag#, #'i#, =han#, and =hon#.² #Mag# indicates an agentive relationship between the verb and the subject phrase in the sentence. #'i# indicates that such a relationship may be either objective, instrumental, or benefactive; =han# that the potential relationships are either objective, dative, or

locative; and =hon# that the relationship is objective.³

#ku'a#	<i>get</i>	#mag#ku'a#	<i>to get</i>
#'uli'#	<i>return</i>	#'i#'uli'	<i>to return</i>
#'adal#	<i>study</i>	#'adal=an	<i>to study</i>
#basa#	<i>read</i>	#basa=hon#	<i>to read</i>

2.2. TENSES

Each of the verb bases may occur in an affixed neutral or infinitive form, as indicated above, or may be inflected for three tenses or aspects: future, past, and progressive.

Infinitive	Future	Past	Progressive
#mag#ku'a#	#ma:#ku'a#	#nag#ku'a#	#nag#kuku'a#
#'i#'uli'#	#'i#'u'uli'#	#'i#'=in=uli'#	#'i#'=in=u'uli'#
		#'i#pig#'uli'#	#'i#pig#'u'uli'#
#'adal=an#	#'a'adal=an#	#'=in=adal=an#	#'=in=a'adal=an#
		#pig#'adal=an#	#pig#'a'adal=an#
#basa=hon#	#babasa=hon#	#b=in=asa#	#b=in=abasa#
		#pig#basa#	#pig#babasa#

2.3. POTENTIAL ACTION AFFIXES

There are two potential action affixes, #maka# and #ma#. #Maka# is portmanteau, indicating, in addition to the semantics of potential action, an agentive case relationship between the verb and the sentence subject. #Ma# occurs with the three other case affixes.⁴

The following examples use the same verb bases presented above. The English translation is based on the volitional aspect of potential action.

#mag#ku'a#	<i>to get</i>	#maka#ku'a#	<i>to be able to get</i>
#'i#'uli'#	<i>to return</i>	#ma#'i#'uli'# ⁵	<i>to be able to return</i>
#'adal=an#	<i>to study</i>	#ma#'adal=an#	<i>to be able to study</i>
#basa=hon#	<i>to read</i>	#ma#basa#	<i>to be able to read</i>

Infinitive	Future	Past	Progressive
#maka#ku'a#	#makaka#ku'a#	#naka#ku'a#	#nakaka#ku'a#
#ma#'i#'uli'#	#ma#'i#'u'uli'#	#na#'i#'uli'#	#na#'i#'u'uli'#
#ma#'adal=an#	#ma#'a'adal=an#	#na#'adal=an#	#na#'a'adal=an#
#ma#basa#	#ma#babasa#	#na#basa#	#na#babasa#

3. POTENTIAL AND DELIBERATE ACTIONS

Potential and deliberate actions can formally be distinguished by the use of different sets of affixes. To show deliberate action, a case affix alone is used. To show potential action, a potential action affix occurs with the case affix. Any time a speaker wishes to show that more, or less, than normal effort is exerted in accomplishing a certain task, he uses the potential action affix. In the examples below, the speaker is also the agent. In the first sentence of each pair he attributes a simple, deliberate action to himself, and in the second, a potential action.

#NAG#KU'A# 'ako nin papel.
I *TOOK* some paper.

#NAKA#KU'A# 'ako nin papel.
I *could GET* some paper.

Da'i ko pa #'I#'=IN=U'ULI'# si libro.
I *didn't RETURN* the book yet.

Da'i ko pa #NA#'I#U'ULI'# si libro.
I *couldn't RETURN* the book yet.

The attribution of potential action may not be true. It may only be an assumption on the part of the speaker, especially if he is not the agent. In the next examples, the speaker is asking questions about the action of his listener.

#NA#BASA# mo na si "Gone With the Wind"?
Did you get the chance to *READ* "Gone With the Wind" yet?

#T=IN=APOS# mo na 'an assignment?
Did you *FINISH* the assignment yet?

When the listener, however, becomes the speaker, as is the case when he answers the question, he then validates, or invalidates the assumption of the speaker who asked the question. If he answers the first question, for example,

'Iyo, #NA#BASA# ko na.
Yes, I *already got a chance to READ* it.

then he is agreeing that it took more than simple, deliberate action to accomplish the task. If however, he answers,

'Iyo, #B=iN=ASA# ko na.
Yes, I *already READ* it.

he is indicating that the task was simply a deliberate one with no extra aptitude involved.

The same is true with the second question. An answer

'Iyo, #T=IN=APOS# ko na.
Yes, I *FINISHED* it.

indicates agreement with the questioner that the task was simply deliberate, while an answer