

# Discourse-based Analysis of Subjecthood in Tagalog\*

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## 1. Introduction

In examining Philippine languages, one is often confronted with the controversy of two related issues of the Philippine voice system and the status of 'subject'. My study explores the nature of 'subject' in Tagalog using a quantitative discourse-based analysis. Before presenting my work in progress on my thesis, I would like to provide a brief background of Tagalog and some of the current analyses relating to this problem.

## 2. Overview of Tagalog Syntax

Tagalog has been regarded as a verb-initial language where the nominals that follow are each preceded by a particle. There are three forms of particles that are extensively used in this language. The three forms are ang, ng, and sa. These forms usually come before common nouns. The particle ang has a special function that reflects the syntactic relation of the nominal that is preceded by ang to that of the affix on the verb. Thus, a certain affix on the verb would trigger a nominal that has one of the semantic roles actor (A), goal (G), locative (L), benefactive (B), or instrument (I) to be preceded by ang. Although ang has been labelled topic in some studies, I have chosen to identify this particle as a focus (FOC) marker.<sup>1</sup> The particles ng and sa, on the other hand, are more constrained with respect to the semantic roles of the nominals in which they introduce. The particle ng usually precede nominals that *function as either actor or goal and the particle sa before locative or genitive nominals.*

Verbal predicates, on the other hand, receive various forms of affixes which encode both aspect and a verbal focus system. In some cases, it is easy to distinguish the affix which signals the focused nominal and the affix which encodes the aspect as demonstrated in (1).

- (1) H -in- iram    **-an** nang babae    nang pera    **ang**  
 -PERF-borrow-LF    A-woman    G-moneyFOC

**bangko.**

L-bank

'The woman borrowed money from the bank.'

In this construction, we find that the verbal suffix -an is a locative focus (LF) and the infix -in- marks the perfective (PERF) aspect. Thus, in (1), the locative nominal receives the focus particle ang. From this example, we find that certain verbal affixes may trigger foregrounding on any one of the nominals that correspond to the affix on the verb. For example, an instrumental prefix ipina- foregrounds (i.e., the NP is preceded by the particle ang) the nominal with the semantic role instrument. There is no restriction on the semantic roles of NPs that can be focused in a Tagalog sentence. Therefore, an actor nominal, a goal/patient nominal, a locative nominal or any argument of other semantic roles are all eligible to be focused.

The affixation system in Tagalog is quite complex because there are cases in which it is difficult to determine the function of the affix on the verb. Example (2) illustrates this point.

- (2) B-in-    ili    ng bata    **ang**    **gulay**    sa palengke.  
 -PERF/GF-buy    A-child    FOC    G-vegetable    L-market

'A child bought the vegetable from the market.'

In this construction, there is only one verbal affix, the infix -in-. Based on the previous example we may conclude that this infix functions as the aspectual marker. However, we find that this infix also functions as the goal focus (GF) marker as given in the gloss. Although the role of -in- is ambiguous in this example, we find that in cases like this, there is always a nominal that is focused. Thus in a basic Tagalog clause, one noun phrase is always formally foregrounded with the particle ang.

### 3. Theoretical Approaches to Philippine Voice System

Currently, there have been three different approaches to the voice system: the Passive Analysis, the Ergative Analysis, and the Topic Theory. With respect to the status of 'subject', there are two positions. The first position considers the relevance of 'subject' in Tagalog and the second position considers it otherwise. Since the issue of the voice system and the status of 'subject' in Tagalog are related, I will start by introducing the approach taken in relation to the issue of voice and then relate this approach to the issue of 'subject'.

The Passive Analysis follows Bloomfield (1917), Blake (1925) and Bell (1979) in the analysis that Tagalog and other Philippine languages are accusative in type and that the goal-focus sentences are passive constructions and therefore the marked form. This approach often views the ang marked nominals to be in the nominative case and thus the 'subject' of the sentence as illustrated in the intransitive sentence (3) and transitive sentences (4a-b).

(3) L -um- angoy ang lalake.  
 -PERF -swim-IT NOM/(ABS) man

'The man swam.'

(4a) B-um- ili nang libro ang lalake.  
 -AF-PERP-buy-T ACC/ACT G-book NOM A-man  
 (OBL)/(ANTIPASS)

'The man bought a book.'

(4b) B-in- ili nang lalake ang libro.  
 -GF-PERF-buy-T OBL/PASS A-man NOM A-book  
 (ERG) (ABS)

'The book was bought by a man.'

'(A man bought the book.)'

In these examples, (4a) is considered the active sentence and (4b) the passive based on which nominal is foregrounded by the particle ang.

The second approach follows De Guzman (1988), McGinn (1988a), Foley and Van Valin (1984), and Cooreman, Fox and Givon (1984). The Ergative Analysis considers Tagalog as ergative in type based on both formal grounds and discourse-based approach. In examples (3) through (4a-b), I have indicated the alternative gloss for this approach in parentheses. The ergative approach considers the goal-focus sentence as the basic unmarked ergative construction as shown in (4b) and the corresponding antipassive construction in (4a). One criticism that can be raised immediately here is that, in most ergative languages, the antipassive usually has a marker different from the other particles that normally mark other nominals. This is not true for Tagalog as both (4a) and (4b) are equally marked morphologically. This is why even in most analyses taking this approach, Tagalog has been viewed to a certain extent as morphologically different from true ergative languages like Dyirbal. With respect to the issue of the status of 'subject', there are conflicting views on this issue. For some, the nominal that functions as the semantic 'agent' is often implicated as the 'subject' of the sentence, while for others the absolutive nominal is considered the 'subject' based on the effect of conjoining two sentences.

The third approach, the Topic Theory, considers Tagalog as neither accusative nor ergative in type but rather treats the goal-focus construction as a distinct topic construction. In this analysis, the notion of 'subject' is not applicable to Tagalog and other Philippine languages and consequently treats ang marked nominals as 'topics.' Schachter (1976), after considering and evaluating all the possible candidates for the syntactic role 'subject', concluded that no single syntactic category in Philippine languages truly corresponds to the notion of 'subject' as found in other languages. Furthermore, Schachter (1977:284) posits that the Philippine data point to a unique distinction of 'subject' properties related to what he called "reference-related properties" and "role-related properties."

In all three approaches described, the method of analysis has been based on formal grammatical processes with the

exception of the Cooreman, Fox, and Givon investigation. Formal grammatical processes such as relativization, floating quantifiers, existentials, reflexives, etc. have served as a basis to derive 'subject' properties for some languages as well as discriminate other languages. This method of analysis, however effective, isolated constructions at the expense of the information that might be realized from viewing these sentences in actual discourse. It is therefore the position of this paper to take an alternative analysis which allows constructions to be left in context of the actual discourse.

#### 4. Methods

In my study, as a native speaker of Tagalog, I have opted to explore the nature of 'subject' in this language by examining both oral narrative and collaborative discourse data which I have elicited from native speakers of Tagalog here in the university. The oral discourse used in this study was drawn from four native speakers of Tagalog who grew up in Manila. The age range of the participants is 20 to 35 years. On different occasions, I asked the participants to narrate how they first met their best friend. I also asked the participants if they would like to share some of their memorable experiences while living here in the States.

Two separate narratives were elicited from the two single Filipinos and one collaborative discourse was generated by the married couple. All three narratives were tape recorded and transcribed. Then I subjected these narratives to Givon's quantitative measurement of topicality. In Givon's measurement, it is assumed that there is a correlation between the selection of a syntactic construction and the degree of topicality of a nominal constituent. According to Givon (1983:13) the two types of information which can be correlated with topicality are:

- (i) the grammatical, 'purely linguistic' devices used by the speaker to code various topics/participants in the discourse; and
- (ii) the exact position of those topics in the discourse, in terms of thematic paragraph structure, distance from

last previous appearance, and persistence in subsequent discourse context.

Thus, by applying this measurement, I hope to determine whether these correlations are evident in my Tagalog corpora and, if they are, whether or not such correlations are significant enough to draw conclusions about the nature of 'subject' based on empirical evidence.

In this method of analysis each NP found in discourse is assumed to have a certain degree of topicality. Topicality here refers to the degree of referential continuity of a given NP on a clausal level and not simply confined to a discrete entity of a single constituent of the clause (Givon 1983, 1990). Therefore, what makes an NP topical is its recurrence in the discourse.

The two variables which measure the degree of topicality of a NP are Referential Distance (RD) and Topic Persistence (TP). RD is the measurement that takes into account the distance between the previous occurrence of a referent/topic and its current occurrence in a clause. Thus, the distance is expressed in terms of the number of clauses to the left. The minimum value of RD is assigned the value 1, that is, one clause back which implies that the referent is maximally continuous. Continuous topic is often found in the middle of the discourse paragraph where all referents have been established between speaker and hearer. On the other hand, RD is assigned an arbitrary maximum value of 20 clauses in cases where a topic is newly introduced or when a discontinued topic is re-introduced back into the discourse register. Consequently when a topic has been discontinued for more than 20 clauses back, that topic when re-entered in the discourse event is given the maximum RD value of 20. Thus, a highly topical NP is said to have a low RD value.

The second variable that measures the degree of topicality is the Topic Persistence which reflects the topic's importance in the discourse. The assumption in applying this measurement is that more important discourse topics appear more frequently in a discourse. Thus, this variable takes into account the number of times a semantically compatible referent



RD=20

TP=0

[ang klasrum].  
classroom

'Because it was the first day of class, I went (to school) early if (in case) I don't find the classroom.'

RD=1

RD=1

TP=1

TP=0

Cl.4 So, maaga[ako] at naghihintay [0] hanggang mag-umpisa  
early I and waited 0 until begin

RD=2

TP=0

[ang klase]  
class

'So I was early and (I) waited until the class started.'

RD=3

TP= 1

Cl.5 Tapos, pumasok [siya].  
then entered he

'Then he entered.'....

The example in (5) is an excerpt from the initial paragraph chain of one of the narrative discourses I have obtained. First I bracketed all topic/participant arguments for all the clauses in order to determine what types of NP constituent I have in the text. In conferring with Dr. Faltz (personal communication) for an argument that is of the genitive form, a half point value for TP was assigned since the genitive cannot truly be considered a full-pledged argument of the clause as seen in clauses (1) and (2). Proceeding now onto the actual measurement, I first worked on the RD measure. Notice that since this example is from the initial paragraph of the narrative, all the NPs in the first clause and several other newly introduced arguments in the subsequent clauses received an RD value of 20. Then looking down to Clause 4, consider the speaker argument in the

pronominal form and in the zero anaphora form. The speaker argument occurs twice in the same clause. Since the minimum value of RD is 1, then within a clause, the last occurrence of this argument in the zero anaphora form also received the minimum value of 1 in reference to the pronoun I in the same clause. Similarly the pronoun I in Clause 4 gets the value 1 in reference to the preceding Clause 3 where the speaker participant is again mentioned.

Moving on to the TP measure. Consider the participant friend (genitive form) in Clause 1. Before assigning the TP value for this argument, it is necessary to look at the following clauses as to whether or not 'the friend' is mentioned in these clauses. In Clause 2, we can identify friend, in the semantically compatible pronominal form kami, however, the 'friend' argument decays thereafter since Clause 2 was the last clause in which the argument friend occurred. Thus, the pronominal form of friend in Clause 2 receives the minimum value of 0, and the possessive form of friend in Clause 1 receives the TP value of 1.

After coding all the NPs found in my corpora, I will compute both RD and TP values for two groups of NP's: the NP preceded by ang and the NP preceded by ng. In one case, I will consider the RD and TP values of both intransitive and transitive clauses. In another case, I will only consider the RD and TP of transitive constructions. In both cases, the nominals are distinguished based on its function as the actor or non-actor of the clause. Then the average will be taken for all the variables and will first be tested for significance by using the Pearson's correlation coefficient. If this correlation fails to reveal enough information, I will proceed by applying a different correlation test depending on the results I get from the Pearson's test.

## 5. Conclusion

In concluding, by using this method of analysis, I hope to test whether a correlation can be drawn for Tagalog between the grammatical 'subject' and the clausal topic or perhaps the semantic agent. If a correlation can be derived from this type of corpora, then we can say that the empirical evidence generated

by this research may be used to substantiate the Topic Theory or the interpretation that the grammatical 'subject' in this language is most often associated with the semantic agent. However, before any significant claims can be made about this approach and how this approach contributes to an understanding of Philippine 'subjects', it is necessary to test this methodology with different discourse genre.

### **Editors' note**

\* The final results of An's study reported in her thesis (1993) argue for a different statistical approach to the analysis from that proposed by Givon (1983, 1990). These Non-Parametric techniques found "the Non-actor/Topic and the Actor/Topic nominals to be viable associations with Tagalog 'subject' for the discourse genre used in this study. The pattern also reveals a preference for the selection of a semantic actor over the topic form." (An 1993:iv).

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> In order to remain neutral in the description of Tagalog syntax, I have chosen to use Focus over Topic as the gloss for the particle ang. Focus as a marker simply reflects the relationship of the verbal affix and the nominal introduced by this particle.

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