

# 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<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup>, comment) is also common. Both the topic and the comment can be [ $\pm$ 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

(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<sup>5</sup>) 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.<sup>6</sup>**  
 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 Otnes (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.

- (14) **Ayaw ka niya.**  
Dislike you his.  
*He dislikes you.*
- (15) **Gusto ng bata ng lapis.**  
Want of child of pencil.  
*The child wants a pencil.*
- (16) **Kailangan-g matalino ang titser.**  
Need    LIG intelligent TOP teacher.  
*The teacher must be intelligent.*
- (17) **Dapat na guro si Juan.**  
Should LIG teacher TOP Juan.  
*(It is) fitting that Juan be a teacher.*
- (18) **Ibig namin iyon.**  
Like we that.  
*We like that.*
- (19) **Maaari ang lansetang iyon.**  
Possible TOP knife    that.  
*That knife will do.*
- (20) **Nais niya nito.**  
Like him this.  
*He would like some of this.*
- (21) **Puwede ba-ng basa(h)-in iyon?**  
Can    QI LIG read GF that?  
*Can (one/I/we) read that?*

**Gusto** and **ibig** also have inflected forms which are often used. None of the other pseudo-verbs can be inflected. The pseudo-verbs can be used in conjunction with regular verbs in a manner similar to the English modals as the examples, with **puwede** above and **kailangan** below, show.

- (22) **Kailangan-g mag-basa bukas ng libro si Pedro.**  
Need    LIG INF read tomorrow of book TOP Pedro.  
*Pedro should read a book tomorrow.*

## 2.1. Statives

A number of stative verbs don't require inflection in all contexts. All of our attempts to neatly bundle these into a few simple categories have failed. They do share some commonality and we'll present them along the lines of Fillmore's (1968) model of case. The first set all belong to the Experientials.

### 2.1.1. Experientials

Under Cognition verbs Fillmore lists: *understand*, *believe*, *expect*, *seem*, *suspect*, *know*, *think* [-agt] and *imagine*. Of these only *believe*, *seem* and *know* don't need inflection in Tagalog.

- (23) **Maniwala sila sa s-in-abi nila.**  
 Believe they of GF say them.  
*They believe what they say.*
- (24) **Wari ko ba'y naka-lutong ako.**  
 Seem I QI AF float I  
*I seem to be floating.*
- (25) **Alam ni Ina ang lahat ko-ng gusto.**  
 Know of Mother TOP all I LIG like.  
*Mother knows everything that I like.*
- (26) **Marunong siya s-um-ayaw.**  
 Know (s)he AF dance.  
*He knows how to dance.*
- (27) **Ewan ko-ng s-in-asabi mo.**  
 Not-know I LIG GF IA say your.  
*I doesn't know what you're saying.*

All of Fillmore's Emotion verbs: *fear*, *love*, *like* and *want* don't need inflection. *Like* and *want* were covered above in the section on pseudo-verbs.

- (28) **Ang amin-g puso ay takot sa ma-la-laki-ng aso.**  
 TOP our LIG cat LIG fear of Plural big LIG dog.  
*Our cat is afraid of big dogs.*

- (29) **Mahal kita.**  
 Love you and I.  
*I love you.*

None of the other so-called Psych-verbs (i.e., *amuse*, *be interesting*, *frightened* [-agt], *please*), fit this category, as we might expect as they're non-stative. Also none of the Sensation verbs (i.e., *see*, *hear*, *smell* [-agt], *taste* [-agt]) fit this category either, though some of the latter can be accomplished using the **may** form discussed below.

### 2.1.2. Benefactives

The second set of stative verbs are the Benefactives. All of the stative Benefactives of Fillmore (i.e., *have*, *need* [one of the pseudo-verbs], *owe*, *own*, *possess*, and *require* [same as *need*]) have uninflected forms in Tagalog. The basis of this group is **may** - *have*.

- (30) **May(roon) bangka ako.**  
 Have boat I.  
*I have a boat.*
- (31) **May utang ako isa-ng libo-ng piso.**  
 Have debt I one LIG thousand LIG peso.  
*I owe one thousand pesos.*
- (32) **May lasang sibuyas ang sopas.**  
 Have taste onion TOP soup.  
*The soup tastes like onion.*
- (33) **Mayroon ako marami-ng aklat.**  
 Have I many LIG book.  
*I own many books.*

This can also be stated, though somewhat idiomatically, as

- (34) **Marami ako-ng aklat.**  
 Many I LIG book.  
*I own many books.*

Another way to show possession is with **sa**. This is as common as the **may** version.

- (35) **Sa istudyante ang libro.**  
 For student TOP book.  
 ? For the student is the book.  
*The book belongs to the student.*

Another way is the use of **ari** - *possession(s)* or the combination **may ari**.

- (36) **Ari ko lahat.**  
 Possession I all.  
*I own everything.*
- (37) **May ari ako-ng damit.**  
 Have possession I LIG clothes.  
*I own the clothes.*

**May** is also used as an Indefinite marker and for Existential statements.

- (38) **May d-ar-ating bukas.**  
 Have AF come tomorrow.  
*(Someone) is coming tomorrow.*
- (39) **May dapat gawin si Juan.**  
 Have possible do TOP Juan.  
*Juan has (something) to do.*
- (40) **May libro sa mesa.**  
 Have book on desk.  
*(There is) a book on the desk.*
- (41) **May tatlo-ng bahay sa akin calye.**  
 Have three LIG house on my street.  
*(There are) three houses on my street.*

As we stated in the introduction to this section, the above examples show that Tagalog doesn't license Null Subjects according to the criteria used by Jaeggli and Safir, uniform morphology. However, as we've seen with the **may**



existentials (38-41) and the example with **puwede** (21), Tagalog does have null subjects.

### 3. Null subjects in Tagalog

Further examples of null subjects include:

#### 3.1. Expletive Deletion

- (42) **Um-u-ulan.**  
AF-IA-rain  
*(It is) raining.*
- (43) **Ma-dilim sa bahay.**  
ADJ dim in house  
*(It is) dark in the house.*
- (44) **Wala-ng mais sa palengke.**  
None LIG corn at market.  
*(There is) no corn at the market.*

#### 3.2. Persona adjectives

- (45) **Marami ang kinumbida.**  
Many TOP invitation.  
*Many were invited.*
- (46) **Na-nalo ang maganda.**  
PA win TOP pretty.  
*The pretty (one) won.*
- (47) **Wala-ng d-um-ating.**  
None LIG AF come.  
*No (one) is coming. (or No (one) came.)*

This second kind of null subject may actually be an example of derived nouns similar in nature to those explained by Starosta (1988:47) in that they are all persona type adjectives used as a noun.

#### 3.3. Other

- (48) **Mas mabuti ang patagilid.**  
 More better TOP slantingly.  
*(It is) better tipped.*
- (49) **Mahirap ang mag-luto.<sup>7</sup>**  
 Difficult TOP INF cook.  
*To cook is difficult.*
- (50) **May(roon)-g t-um-a-takbo sa kuwarto.**  
 Have LIG AF IA run in room.  
*(Someone is) running in the room.*
- (51) **K-um-akanta ang nag-ta-trabaho.**  
 AF-IA sing TOP AF-IA work.  
*(The ones) working are singing.*

Example (48) has an adjectival comment and an adverbial topic, there are no verbs or nouns. Example (51) has a verbal comment and a verbal topic there are no nouns only verbs.

#### 4. Conclusion

Huang (1982:366) states that Null Subjects can occur "in one of two types of languages. Either a language with a very rich agreement system, or a language without agreement at all." Jaeggli and Safir (1989:35) also require rich agreement for languages like Italian in contrast to those languages "like Chinese which show no tense or agreement and are thus uniformly unaffixed." From the data above it seems that Tagalog has neither rich agreement nor uniform morphology yet it has Null Subjects. It thus presents problems for Huang, Jaeggli and Safir and the other current theories of "pro-drop" in the literature (cf. Chomsky 1981, 1982; Hyams 1990; Koster 1986). We feel that most of the problem lies in the dichotomy that is set up for the parameter (i.e., very rich morphology or none at all). This dichotomy seems natural enough given the feature-like representation given to parameters in the Government-Binding literature (van Riemsdijk and Williams (1986) state that parameters are "probably binary"). If in fact there are more than two values possible for parameters then Tagalog could be explained as a mid-level valued language in regards to the pro-drop parameter. Tagalog certainly seems *rich enough* to at least

license expletive deletion. If we look at the examples given above we see that it doesn't have much more than that.

The above examples solidly demonstrate that Tagalog has a fairly rich but mixed morphology yet it licenses Null Subjects. Some possible explanations for this phenomenon are a *rich enough* morphology, the nature of the topic-comment construction, the inherent case marking of Tagalog prepositions, the personification of adjectives and the lexicalization of verbs. While this paper doesn't posit a new encapsulation for the pro-drop parameter, it does stand as a counter-example to the current formulation.

### Notes

1. The first author is affiliated with Rome Laboratory and Syracuse University, the second author is affiliated with the first. We wish to thank Alan Stevens, Barry Miller and Eric Schiller for fruitful discussions, additions and corrections to this paper. We claim responsibility for any remaining errors or oversights.

2. We assume here that Tagalog is configurational, this perhaps needs some support. Carrier (1979) characterizes Tagalog as being free word order yet there are only two levels of freedom: between the comment and the topic; and between the arguments of the verb. Most of the remaining order is fixed. In particular, Roberts (1985:52) notes that morphological agreement, (such as between Tagalog prepositions [termed case-clitics by Carrier] and nominals), allows more freedom in word order than the syntactic agreement schema of English. Schachter and Otnes (1972:83-85) discuss further restrictions on word order in Tagalog.

In addition to a restricted word order the language has other characteristics that have been used to show configurationality: required verbal arguments (cf., Hale 1978, 1983, 1985; Jelinek 1984, Kornfilt 1990, Saito 1985) empty categories (Carrier-Duncan 1985:4), and hierarchically explainable inflectional-case marking correspondence (Carrier-Duncan 1985:11).

3. A ligature is either a lexical (**ay**) or phonetic (**ng**) linker. They have no intrinsic semantic meaning. All ligatures will be marked as LIG in the transcriptions. Ng is shortened to just g after an n, as in example (16).

4. An example for each of these four types are listed by number (#):

Verbal Comment	+	Verbal Topic (53)
Verbal Comment	+	Verbless Topic (3)
Verbless Comment	+	Verbal Topic (51)
Verbless Comment	+	Verbless Topic (50)

5. The following abbreviations are used throughout this paper:

AF	Actor Focus
CA	Contemplated Aspect
GF	Goal Focus
IA	Imperfective Aspect
INF	Infinitive
LIG	Ligature
PA	Perfective Aspect
QI	Question Indicator - an Interrogative Marker
TOP	Topic

6. The /h/ in **bilhin** is a matter of speaker preference. Most informants prefer **bilhin** to **bilin**.

7. This example cannot be explained by calling **mag-luto** a gerund as gerunds in Tagalog are of the form **pag+stem** for aspectless and **pagka+reduplication+stem** for perfectives.

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