

THE INTERPRETATION OF POTENTIAL ACTION IN BIKOL VERBS

Malcolm Warren Mintz

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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

'Iyo, #NA#TAPOS# ko na.
Yes, I could FINISH it.

indicates that more than simple, deliberate effort was involved.

In the instance where neither the speaker nor the listener is the agent of the action, then the speaker must assume that the listener at least shares an understanding of the possible situation, and that the listener, at least for the present, is willing to accept that what the speaker says is true. For example, a speaker may say either of the following:

Mayo' si Jim na #'A'ADAL=AN#.
Jim has nothing to STUDY.

Mayo' si Jim na #MA#'A'ADAL=AN#.
There's nothing Jim can STUDY.

The use of distinct affixes indicates the difference between deliberate and potential action.

There is a further question, however. Why should a speaker assume his listener interprets potential action as volitional and not non-volitional? In other words, why should the speaker assume his speaker will understand Mayo' si Jim na #ma#'a'adal=an# as *There is nothing Jim can study* and not as *There is nothing Jim can mistakenly study*?

In this instance, and in the previous examples, volitional action is probably the most conventional interpretation shared by both the speaker and his listener. If the situation is not indicated as unusual, then why should the interpretation of the sentence be unusual?

What happens, however, when the situation is unusual and the speaker wants to convey the information that his use of the potential action affix is to be interpreted as nonvolitional and not volitional? The speaker has two recourses, and will probably use both of them. One is formal and one is contextual. To formally indicate that the potential action affix is to be interpreted as nonvolitional, length may be added to the final vowel of the affix. To indicate the situation is to be interpreted as unusual, the sentence may be expanded to further clarify the context. The following are examples.

#NAKA:#KU'A# 'ako nin papel, ta da'i ko 'aram na gagamiton pa.
I accidentally TOOK some paper because I didn't know that someone was still going to use it.

Maluya. #NA:#BASA# mo 'an "Gone With the Wind", pero "Uncle Tom's Cabin" 'an assignment ta.
What a mistake. You READ "Gone With the Wind", but our assignment is "Uncle Tom's Cabin".

Length added to the potential action affix in negative sentences also conveys nonvolitional action. Instead, however, of that action being interpreted as accidental, as was the case in the above sentences, such action receives an interpretation of thwarted volitional action.

Such thwarting usually arises from some physical shortcoming on the part of the agent.

Da'i ko #NA:#I#'ULI# si libro, ta hilang pa 'ako.
I couldn't RETURN the book because I was still sick.

Da'i ko siya #NA:#HILING# ta ra'ot pa si salming ko.
I couldn't SEE her because my eyeglasses were still broken.

Da'i siya #NAKA:#DANGOG# ta kulog pa an talinga niya.
She couldn't HEAR because her ear still hurt.

4. NONVOLITIONAL AND VOLITIONAL ACTIONS

Just as there are contexts in which a speaker and listener tend to interpret potential action affixes as volitional, there are also contexts where such an interpretation is shared as nonvolitional. One of these contexts is that in which an agent does not appear in the sentence.

The agent, in sentences such as these, is not left out because it is understood, but because it is not important in the interpretation of the sentence. Nonvolitional action is conceived of in terms of result, not in terms of means, and due to such an interpretation an agent is often not necessary. This may differ from preferred expression in English. In English, for example, we might say 'I dropped the dish', whereas in Bikol, in the exact same situation, speakers say 'The dish fell'. In like manner, Bikol speakers say 'My watch got lost', 'The lamp got knocked over', etc., and not 'I lost my watch', 'He knocked over the lamp', etc. If more information is requested, it can be supplied in subsequent sentences.

The following are Bikol sentences in which the interpretation of the potential action affix is nonvolitional action.

#NA#RA'OT# 'an 'auto niya.
His car BROKE DOWN.

Tiba'ad #MA#BARI# 'an silya kon dakolon magtukaw.
The chair might break if a lot of people sit on it.

#NA#HULOG# 'an plato.⁶
The plate FELL.

#NA#'ATI'=AN# 'an bado' ko.
My clothes got DIRTY.

These sentences cannot readily be interpreted as volitional action unless some attempt is made to clarify the context.

What if an agent were added to the sentences? Could these then receive an interpretation of volitional action? The answer to this depends both upon the intent of the speaker, and upon the shared speaker-listener understanding of the situation.

If a sentence such as

#NA#KAGAT# 'ako.

I got BITTEN.

received an agent and became

#NA#KAGAT# 'ako nin namok.

I got BITTEN by a mosquito.

the interpretation would still probably be nonvolitional. Deliberate action, which we will come to again shortly, may be attributed to the mosquito, but not, it seems, the extra degree of intent to become volitional action. This again brings us back to the question of assumption or attribution of potential action on the part of the speaker. Does a speaker believe a mosquito has the extra volition to bite someone? If he does believe that, does he share this assumption with his listener?

If the agent is inanimate, then the chance is so much greater that the interpretation will remain nonvolitional.

#NA#RA'OT# 'an 'auto nin bagyo.

The storm DESTROYED the car.

What happens, however, if the agent is one to whom volitional action can be attributed? For example, does one interpret sentences such as the following as volitional or nonvolitional action?

#NA#RA'OT# ko 'an 'auto niya.

I accidentally RUINED his car.

#NA#'IPIT# niya 'an muro' ko sa puerta.

He CAUGHT my finger in the door.

#NA#WARA'# mo si libro niya?

Did you LOSE his book?

Do we use the above nonvolitional interpretations, or volitional interpretations such as the following?

I was able to RUIN his car.

He could CATCH my finger in the door.

Were you able to LOSE his book?

Probably the nonvolitional interpretation would be more common because of what the speaker and listener generally understand about the agent and the nature of the action. It is possible, however, that the speaker considers the agent malicious. He may then intend a volitional interpretation of the action. But, again, does the listener share his views? If not, then the speaker has the chance of being misunderstood. How can a speaker express his meaning unambiguously when there is a change of misinterpretation?

In the preceding section, volitional and nonvolitional actions were disambiguated by the addition of length to the potential action affix.

Length, however, can only be used to disambiguate actions which may be misinterpreted as volitional. If an action is interpreted as nonvolitional, length cannot induce a volitional interpretation. What the addition of length will do in these cases is further emphasize nonvolitional action. For example,

#NA#RA'OT# ko 'an 'auto niya.

will generally be interpreted as a nonvolitional action:

I accidentally RUINED his car.

If length is added to the potential action affix,

#NA:#RA'OT# ko 'an 'auto niya

then the sentence will even more emphatically be interpreted as nonvolitional action. There is no formal addition to the potential action affix so that a volitional action interpretation can unambiguously be made.

In cases such as the above, for the sake of clarity, a speaker would not use the potential action affix. He would probably use only a case affix for the expression of a simple, deliberate action. There is no doubt about the interpretation of the following sentences.

#PIG#RA'OT# ko 'an 'auto niya.

I purposely RUINED his car.

#'=IN=IPIT# niya 'an muro' ko sa puerta.

He purposely CAUGHT my finger in the door.

#PIG#WARA'# mo si libro niya?

Did you purposely LOSE his book?

There are also cases, again, those in which the result of the action is more important than the means, where volitional and nonvolitional action may remain ambiguous and not disturb communication. In such cases, the speaker does not care how his listener interprets the means. In the following sentence, for example, whether the agent was able to hear the President's speech, or just happened to hear it, does not seem to matter. What is important is whether he heard it or not.

#NA#DANGOG# mo 'an sinabi ni Marcos?

Did you HEAR what Marcos said?

In like manner, the following sentence may be interpreted either as 'I was able to see', or 'I happened to see Boyet at the market'.

#NA#HILING# ko si Boyet sa sa'od.

I SAW Boyet at the market.

As mentioned previously, disambiguation can be made in the direction of nonvolitional action by the addition of length. This would be done only if it were important to the speaker that he and his listener share the same interpretation of means. The two sentences below would be interpreted unambiguously as nonvolitional action.

#NA:#DANGOG# mo 'an sinabi ni Marcos?
Did you happen to HEAR what Marcos said?

#NA:#HILING# mo si Boyet sa sa'od?
Did you happen to SEE Boyet at the market?

If the above sentences were expressed as deliberate action, the interpretation, while unambiguous, would be slightly different.

#PIG#DANGOG# mo 'an sinabi ni Marcos sa radio?
Did you LISTEN to what Marcos said on the radio?

#H=IN=IHILING# ko si Boyet sa sa'od, pero da'i niya 'ako
 pig'i'intindi.
*I was LOOKING at Boyet at the market, but he didn't pay any
 attention to me.*

There are also examples where an action cannot be deliberate.
 Expression would be made with the potential action affix.

Pagduman mo sa Daraga, #NA#RISA# mo si dakulang simbahan sa ita'as
 nin bukid?
When you went to Daraga, did you NOTICE the big church on the hill?

Risa has no deliberate form. Expression of a simple, deliberate action would probably be made with the use of the base hiling *look at*.

5. CONCLUSION

Potential and deliberate action in Bikol can be formally distinguished by different verbal affixes. Within the sphere of potential action, however, there may be two interpretations, one volitional, and the other nonvolitional.

The attribution of potential action is made by the speaker. The interpretation of such action, however, is shared by both the speaker and listener. There are interpretations which both the speaker and listener clearly share as either volitional or nonvolitional action because of shared experience and a shared understanding of the agent and the nature of the action. There are other sentences which are ambiguous. A speaker may disambiguate such sentences formally or contextually.

Contextually he may indicate the unusual circumstance of the sentence, thereby clarifying the situation. Formally, he may disambiguate potential action in the direction of nonvolitional action by adding length to the potential action affix. If he wishes to disambiguate potential action in the direction of volitional action, he will have to forgo the use of the potential action affix, using simply a case affix. When the speaker does not care how his listener interprets the means of an action, as long as the result is clear, potential action may be left ambiguous. In all cases, formal and contextual specifications are made only when necessary and only to the degree necessary to clarify potentially ambiguous actions.

N O T E S

1. There are as many as sixteen semantic affixes which may be added to verb bases. Among these are affixes showing actions generalized over time or over a set of objects, social actions emphasizing the relationship between participants in the action, intensive actions, and repetitive actions occurring more than once in a set period of time. Semantic affixes also show actions that are incipient, those that are the consequence of previous actions, those that are directive or imperative, reciprocal, comitative, emphatically plural, mitigated in some respect, pending, and developed due to outside influences.

2. Verb bases and prefixes are bounded by #: #ku'a# *get*; #mag#. Suffixes are bounded initially by = and finally by #: =han#. Infixes, which are discussed in the section on tenses, are bounded by =: =in=. A glottal stop is indicated by an apostrophe, '.

3. Suffix initial h, as in =hon# and =han#, is deleted when suffixed to consonant final bases.

4. #Ma# and the case affix =hon# cannot occur at the same time on the same base. The case relationship indicated by =hon#, however, remains. A possible explanation is that =hon# is deleted after #ma# is prefixed. There is precedent for such deletion since =hon# is also deleted in the past and progressive verb inflection.

5. In Naga City, the preferred form is #'i#ka#'uli'#. The common replacement of #ma#'i# by #'i#ka# seems to be restricted to the Naga City area, reflecting, perhaps, a local development. The form presented as part of the above paradigm is the more common throughout the standard dialect region.

6. This is a verb base which generally takes the case affix #i# to indicate an objective case relationship between the verb and the sentence subject. This particular case affix contains a sense of 'alienable action', an action which results in the object ending up in a location different from where it was the start of the action. Interestingly, in the presence of the potential action affix when no agent is present in the sentence, such an affix is omitted.

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