

McKaughan's analysis of Philippine voice

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The voice systems of Philippine-type languages are a notorious problem for both descriptive grammarians and theoretical syntacticians.¹ It sometimes seems as if Austronesian specialists can talk (and write) of nothing else. Our understanding of these systems, and the terms we use to describe them, owe a great debt to Howard McKaughan's early work on Philippine languages, and in particular on Maranao.

One of Howard's most successful and influential proposals was one that he later tried to retract. I say "tried to retract" because by that time it had been so widely adopted among Philippinists as to be nearly indispensable. I am referring to Howard's choice of the term *topic* for the noun phrase (NP) marked by *so* in Maranao (or *ang* in Tagalog). Both his reasons for making that choice in his early work (1958, 1962), and his reasons for arguing against it in later work (1973), are illuminating and reflect important insights into the structure of these languages.

Aside from this one terminological innovation, the terms that McKaughan chose to describe the basic clause structure of Maranao were fairly conventional.² He referred to the NP-relation markers (such as *ang*, *ng*, and *sa* in Tagalog) as *case* markers; the affixes on the verb which indicate the relation of the *topic* he called *voice*-marking affixes.

But McKaughan felt it was necessary to depart from Bloomfield's pioneering work on Tagalog (1917) and Ilokano (1942), in which the *ang* phrase was referred to as *subject* and the non-active voices as various types of passive: *direct passive* for Tagalog *-in*, *instrumental passive* for *-i-*, and *local passive* for *-an*. He explained his reasons for rejecting *subject* in favor of *topic* as follows (1973:206): "Philippine languages are very different compared to European languages. One just cannot understand the Philippine language grammar with the traditional meaning of terms in current use, or at least so I thought."

The crucial difference that makes the passive analysis inappropriate for most Philippine languages is the nondemoting nature of the voice alternation. The passive agent in European languages is clearly demoted to oblique (or perhaps adjunct) status, but this is not true for the Actor of a non-active clause in Philippine languages.³ In recent years the term SYMMETRIC(AL) VOICE has been used for such alternations (Foley 1998; Ross 2002), and the phenomenon continues to be a significant challenge for most formal theories of syntax. I do not want to claim

¹ The term *Philippine type* is sometimes used to refer to languages which share the unique voice system characteristic of languages in the central Philippines. It is intended to be typological rather than geographical in scope, since it includes a number of the Austronesian languages of Taiwan, as well as languages of northeastern Borneo, northern Sulawesi, and Madagascar, and excludes some of the languages spoken in the Philippines.

² He noted (1958:4) that Hockett's *Course in modern linguistics* (1958) was an important influence on his choice of terminology.

³ I use the term *non-active* to refer to all voices other than active voice (sometimes called *Actor focus*). So a non-active clause is one in which the grammatical subject (or *pivot*) is different from the Actor.

that McKaughan had, as early as 1958, a fully developed conception of symmetric voice as we currently understand it. But clearly he sensed an important difference between Maranao voice and the English passive, and was attempting to represent that difference within an analysis that made linguistic sense—i.e., made Maranao seem like a real human language.

The analysis that McKaughan proposed was that the Actor is always the syntactic subject of a Maranao clause. In fact, under this analysis the voice system does not produce any changes in grammatical relations; the mapping of those relations to semantic roles remains constant across voice categories. The function of the voice-marking affix is to indicate the *syntactic relation* of the topic, while the syntactic relation of the other NP arguments is indicated by their case markers.

The concept of syntactic relations plays a very major role in McKaughan's analysis, a fact which he attributes partly to the influence of Richard Pittman (for example, Pittman 1953). Some of his relation labels seem to be purely syntactic (*subject, object*), while others seem to be primarily semantic (*instrument*)—or some mixture of both (*referent*: a kind of all-purpose oblique relation which covered various semantic roles including *beneficiary, location, recipient, and source*). In 1958 the distinction between semantic roles and grammatical relations was not yet a major theoretical concern, and because McKaughan's analysis posited a fixed association between the two, it did not force him to make this distinction explicit. However, in later work (McKaughan 1970) he did move in this direction with his discussion of so-called deep vs. surface cases, in the sense of Fillmore (1968). He viewed this (1970:295) as a major advance in clarifying “what has confused our descriptions for so long, and what has made us unintelligible to non-Philippinists in our discussions of voice, focus, case, topic, etc.” See Bender (this volume) for discussion of McKaughan's influence on Fillmore's work.

McKaughan's (1958) analysis seems to have had a strong influence on subsequent descriptions of Tagalog. The same essential view of the voice system is found in the work of Wolfenden (1961), Schachter & Otnes (1972), and Carrier-Duncan (1985). This view was widely adopted as a model for describing the clause structure of other Philippine languages for several decades, beginning around 1960. McKaughan's original analysis also anticipated in interesting ways a recent proposal for treating symmetric voice in Malagasy (and potentially in Philippine languages as well) within the Minimalist framework. Pearson (2005) analyzes voice alternations in Malagasy as *A-bar movement*: essentially a kind of topicalization, which does not in fact involve a change in grammatical relations.

It is worth noting that McKaughan did not use the term *focus* to refer to the voice-marking affixes, although by 1958 this term was already beginning to gain acceptance. Blust (2002:73) lists works by A. Healey (1958) and P. Healey (1960) as the first published uses of focus in this sense. He also notes McKaughan's (1970) reference to Dean (1958) in which voice and focus are used as synonyms.⁴ P. Healey (2002:22) adds that the use of focus as a label for Philippine voice systems came out of a discussion among Richard Pittman, Alan Healey, and Wilf Douglas at the SIL summer school in Melbourne, Australia, in early 1954.⁵

Pike (1963:218 fn. 5) noted that McKaughan (and Wolfenden) disapproved of the *focus* terminology, feeling that it “makes the actor or goal too prominent[,...] leads to difficulty in distinguishing between focus and emphasis, and fails to give central attention to the activity itself and its relationships.” The centrality of the verb was an important principle for McKaughan, and a major portion of his dissertation was devoted to verbal inflection. He wrote (1958:4): “we would like to emphasize the importance of describing verbal inflectional categories in the study of Philippine languages. [... T]he primary key to sentence

⁴ Dean (1958:59 fn. 2) also provides a helpful note on the terms *actor, goal, and referent*, as they came to be used in Philippine linguistics: “The terms ‘actor’, ‘goal’, and ‘referent’ are from Bloomfield, and are roughly equivalent to subject, object, and indirect object respectively.”

⁵ Quakenbush (2003:8 fn. 15) mentions this as well.

structure is to be found in the verb where basic syntactic relations are indicated, and which is the center of most major sentence types." Subsequent research on Philippine languages has only confirmed the validity of this judgment.

We have said that the *topic* analysis deals fairly successfully with one of the most puzzling aspects of Philippine voice. However, as McKaughan came to realize, there is a fundamental problem with this approach, namely that the word *topic* has a different meaning in general linguistics. The explosion of interest in the linguistic properties of TOPIC 'what the sentence is about' and FOCUS 'crucial new information', which began in the mid 1970s, gave rise to no end of confusion, as non-Philippinists misinterpreted the specialized use of these terms in Philippine linguistics and jumped to all sorts of wrong assumptions. However, the confusing effects of the terminology began much earlier, and specialists in Philippine languages were not immune. A great deal of the descriptive work on Philippine languages seems to assume that the *ang* phrase is, in fact, a topic in the generally accepted sense; and some authors take it to be simultaneously a focused element as well, which (under the normal interpretation of these terms) should be impossible.

In fact, the *ang* phrase does not necessarily have the pragmatic properties of either a topic or a focus. One of the standard tests for these properties involves the use of question-and-answer pairs. The question (or Wh-) word in a content question must be the focus of that question, and the constituent of the answer that corresponds to the question word must be the focus of the answer. Neither the question word nor its answer can be a topical element. As Naylor (1975) demonstrates, content questions in Tagalog do not determine the voice category of the answer. (See also Kroeger 1993:57–69 and Kaufman 2005.) The phrase which answers the question may be marked with *ang* or one of the other case markers, showing that the *ang* phrase is inherently neither topic nor focus.

McKaughan's later paper argues against his previous use of the term *topic* and in favor of adopting the term *subject* as a label for the *ang* phrase:

I am ready to emphasize now that phrases introduced by *so* in Maranao or *ang* in Tagalog [...] are SUBJECTS of their sentences. These phrases (or their pronoun substitutes) are in the most favored or primary relation to the verb. They have been nominated as subjects, and the predicate is that which says or asserts something about the subject. Please, reader, forgive me for confusing the issue by calling these subjects the "topic" of the sentence. (1973:208)

A public retraction is always a difficult thing to do, as Howard himself pointed out; and few linguists have done it as gracefully or straightforwardly as he did. Another virtue of the paper is that it is so clearly written. It may seem surprising that so few linguists can (or perhaps choose to) write clearly, but in this paper Howard gave us a welcome model of how to say what one means.

The main point of his argument is that the terms *subject* and *topic*—in their normal, generally accepted meanings—are applicable and appropriate for Philippine languages as well. The *subject* is the argument which stands in "the most favored or primary" syntactic relation to the clause. The term *topic*, he argues, is best reserved for a constituent that is overtly topicalized. In Maranao, this means that it occurs in preverbal position, is followed by the particle *na*, and (when it is not the subject of the clause) antecedes a resumptive pronoun which indicates the syntactic relation of the topic to the verb. I would whole-heartedly endorse Howard's plea to use traditional terms in their traditional senses whenever possible.⁶

⁶ Quakenbush (2003:17–18) makes a similar plea concerning the specialized Philippinist use of *topic* and *focus*.

However, in spite of the logic, clarity, and graciousness of his appeal, he seems to have attracted few converts, at least at first. The *topic-focus* model was firmly entrenched, and would remain so for another fifteen years at least. Moreover, just a few years later Schachter (1976, 1977) published two very influential papers arguing against the use of the term *subject* for the *ang* phrase in Tagalog, on the basis of an apparent ambiguity or split in the syntactic properties commonly used to identify subjects. Another competing model was the ergative analysis which gained considerable popularity in the 1980s, stimulated by the work of Gerdts (1980, 1988) and Payne (1982), among others.⁷

The debates over Philippine voice have continued and intensified over the past fifteen years, and it would not be possible to attempt a complete review here.⁸ Nevertheless, the basic framework of McKaughan (1973) continues to be favored by a number of scholars, including myself, and I am grateful for this opportunity to acknowledge our continuing debt to Howard and his work.

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⁷ Interestingly, McKaughan (1958:16 fn. 6) suggests *ergative* as a label for the case marking of the Actor in a non-active clause. This was some fifteen years before ergativity became a widely discussed phenomenon.

⁸ See Blust (2002) and Ross (2002) for a fuller discussion.

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