

Notes from a Language Exercise

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I

These notes are about an exercise tried out in a graduate school cultural anthropology class. The exercise involved bringing some current fieldwork material into class. The results were interesting both for a few things learned about one indigenous Mindanao language and for a few seeds of anthropological contemplation quietly sown on well-prepared soil.

The session began with two or three rounds of listening to some digital recording. After the first round, the students were asked, "What language was that?" In an earlier session, they had given their ethnic affiliations as Bisaya, Ilongo, Tagakaolo, Arumanen Manobo, Waray, Maranao, Tagalog, Ilocano, Iranun, Bikolano, or a combination of some of these. They were native users of the languages of their respective groups. Moreover, everyone was fluent in two or three Philippine languages. In answer to the question, each indicated that the language in the recording was not one they knew.

The follow-up was, "In spite of that, were you still able to understand it?" Not surprisingly, they had different degrees of understanding. The class as a whole, however, agreed over the general meaning of what was said in the recording, although as one student put it, "Not word for word." For the second round thus, the class was listening more intently.

Next, a transcript of the recording was provided to each student. Attention shifted to written text, although the recording was played back a third time. The class was told to put aside temporarily all questions about

the circumstances of the recording and of the transcription, and the like. Instead, they were to direct their attention to the two principal speakers.

The transcript was as follows:¹

A: *Umm, sige. Binukid da.*

B: *Binukid?*

A: *Ho-o.*

B: *Yan a si Sonny Boy Talasan, taga Nabawang, intaelæk ta Pulangiyan, apo hi Datu Mandublas alias Datu Kunog-kunog.*

Yan a kinamagulangan na bata hi Nay-iluyan daw hi Man-iluyan. Sa ngaran papa ko si Nestor, sa mama ko si Susan. Bisan man sikay . . . aw, pobre da ba, sikay gihapon paniguro. Ah! Yan da.

A: *Hapila alan-alan ho mga saelæd no?*

B: *Aw, kuan, sikay magsaelæd . . . , atchu-ay kay da. Ha walo kay da buok.*

A: *Uh, atchu-ay da! Hapila na sa edad no iman?*

B: *Sa edad ko, baynte dos.*

A: *Baynte dos. Inu sa pigbuhat no iman? Panginabuhian no?*

B: *Panginabuhian ko iman, tagtrabaho a diya ta Malaybalay Stock Farm para ho . . . pag . . . makabulig ho pagpaeskwela taina mga atubay ko.*

The recording is of an ordinary use of Binukid. In retrospect, it did seem clearer that in the earlier rounds the class had quickly established the general language situation—someone was introducing himself—and was only struggling to fill in details. When the transcript was provided, a completion of many such details took place, with a clearer admission as well that some gaps could not be filled.

To check actual comprehension, the students were asked to summarize what was said in the recording. A number did so by attempting translations.

What is interesting is that they translated first into Bisaya and into Pilipino, and only later into English. Their translations were quite acceptable. The teacher's translation was unnecessary.

To the students therefore, the recording was quite intelligible *even at first contact* with the language. That has got to be the first and most important note. Had they not arrived at the degree of understanding they did, the rest of the exercise would have fallen flat. It is even more important for what it suggests at some higher plane.

Many people in urban Mindanao know two or three native Philippine languages—say, Bisaya, Ilongo, and Pilipino. Not that many may be aware that all of Mindanao's tribal languages belong to the same family as these three languages. A little thinking might help them realize that by far the most frequent use of tribal languages of Mindanao has got to be ordinary, day-to-day conversational and common situations. Therefore, certain would-be fieldworkers from the mainstream lowland culture might be surprised to find that, even during their very first experience of, say, Matigsalug or Mamanwa or Talaandig or Tagakaolo, the tribal language is not at all unintelligible.

An expanded next-edition of this exercise—to include an additional recording or two, at higher degree of difficulty, of a different language genre, from some other indigenous Mindanao groups, but selected to maintain the first-contact condition—might be a good idea.

II

For the next part of the exercise, each member of the class was given two lists. One was for all the words used in the recording and in the sequence these were used. The second was for the same words but in alphabetical sequence. This latter would show which words were used more than once. Everyone was instructed, among a few others, to put checks beside words whose meaning they knew or understood, and then to identify to which part of speech the marked words belong.

A not-so-random sampling here might give the reader some idea of the intervening individual work. Someone realized aloud that several words had a clear Spanish flavor—*pobre* was immediately given as an example and identified as an adjective. One laughed at the way *baynte* was spelled; two repeated the way *baynte dos* was actually pronounced by the main speaker. A third was concerned with whether numbers are nouns or adjectives. Another pointed out that the root word in *tagtrabaho* and *pagpaeskwela* would count as Spanish. Still another noted that the *sige* in the recording seemed to have a different meaning from what he remembered of college Spanish. When a lady shared that she had twenty-four units of Spanish during her college days, a gentleman observed that revealed her *edad*.

The class eventually moved on to the counting. From the first list, the transcript has 119 individual words and word-like units. To everyone in the class, one of these (*pag*) was merely the beginning of a word the speaker did not complete. Hence, there are only 118 “real” words in the text. Starting from the second list, “real” words used more than once were each counted only once. Such elimination yielded a third list of only seventy six distinct words. Of these, four were readily identified as interjections.² Another sixteen, either alone or along with others, are place names or personal names, and all were identified as such. Going by the check marks, these proper nouns were considered by the students something “known” and “understood.” That accounting left fifty-six other distinct words. Of these remaining fifty-six, anywhere from twenty-seven to thirty-one were “known” and “understood” by individual students. Or so they said.

The arithmetic was routine (though apparently unworthy of graduate students’ least exertion). Based on the marks on the first list, the students in effect indicated they knew and understood from 48 percent to 57 percent of the words. Based on the third list, the one that drops the one incomplete word and the all-too-easy interjections and proper names, the percentages were from 51 percent to 59 percent. When the proper nouns and interjections are counted in (as in the second list)—“Proper nouns and interjections are part of the language, no?”—the statistics rise to from 63 percent to 66 percent.

The probable inaccuracies notwithstanding, these numbers surprised even those who were minimally intellectually engaging in the exercise.

This was a first contact with Binukid, albeit ordinary Binukid and with the benefit of digital playback plus a read-at-will transcript. Even if the objections are allowed their worst, the fact survives all damage: The students were genuinely surprised at their *high degree of lexical familiarity* with the ordinary Pulangiyan Binukid they heard. That is the second note.

Again, it suggests a highly specialized job. There shall have to be some other time for a more rigorous, more systematic check of the lexical overlap of various dialectal variants of Binukid with each other, with the neighboring languages, and with Bisaya, Ilongo, and Tagalog, even if done only as a priest’s general hobby. More importantly, this second note is part of the explanation for the first: No wonder they understood the recording!

In that light, the best students in the class asked two correct follow-through questions: “Language is more than just the vocabulary, no?” and “Father, perhaps you can train us on some fieldwork-relevant techniques so we can pick up a lot more on indigenous languages and do so faster?” These led, of course, to the main input items for the session.

Before closing this section, two little questions during the word-lists portion can illustrate the third note. The first was asked by one of the better students (who also observed that the shortest words were the ones most frequently used). It concerned the *si*, *hi* and *sa*, among others. She and a few others could correctly give Bisaya and Pilipino equivalents for these words, and yet could not quite pin down their meaning. More importantly, she could not honestly declare these to be prepositions or conjunctions or interjections; these obviously were not verbs, adverbs, adjectives, nouns, or pronouns.

She has every right to be confused as to the part of speech. That is so because the three words do not belong to any of the eight parts of speech with which Filipino students are familiar from English grammar classes. The three are, in fact, case marker particles. They have no meaning, but they perform crucially important grammatical functions. In the actual text, *si* is a marker for proper names in the subject case, while *hi* for proper names in

the object case³ and *sa* for common nouns in the subject case. Their removal from the sentences where they are found might occasion a gentle correction from a native Pulangiyen Binukid user. Interchanging the *si* and *hi* in some of them leads to odd sentences.

The other question was of a similar vein. Someone else noted that the *ba* and the *kuan* were the same words used in Ilongo and Bisaya. Her question though was to which part of speech these belong. Because she was not sure, she did not put check marks beside these words in her lists. Again, she did well to not raise a question about the meaning, for likewise these words do not have any real meaning by themselves. Rather, their meaning is in their use, which is to introduce a tone, a mood, or a quality. They are discourse particles, a species in the same genus as the case marker particles. The genus in turn thrives in abundance in Philippine languages.

Aside from indicating a hesitation or a temporary forgetting of some word, the *kuan* has a unique property. It can be subjected to the usual morphing by means of prefixes, suffixes, infixes, duplications. “*Kuan* was . . . *kuan*-ized at the . . . *kuan*” is the silly-sounding translation of an acceptable sentence in many Philippine languages. The sentence is perfectly understandable to a listener with whom a discourse context has already been established—that is, where speaker and listener already know or can assume they are talking about a certain person, dealing with some specific action done to that person, and referring to a specific location or event.

Together, the two questions suggest that the better students were already groping for something beyond vocabulary, possibly being drawn slightly into the realm of grammar, syntax, and discourse. They encountered a category of words which they could not easily handle using what they knew well from their English grammar classes. Happily, they also used them as language models they implicitly mastered from their general learning of Bisaya, Ilongo, and Pilipino.

There is something here which is underappreciated or unexamined. That is the third note.

III

Some things embedded in the recording could have been useful in the subsequent sessions of the course. A shift to first-person is best as I put down on paper a couple of them.

One concerns names. Sonny Boy Talasan mentioned his grandfather, Datu Mandublas. In 1993, I asked several Nabawang adults what his “real” name was. None of them denied me that datum—Celestino Ampildon—but nobody ever referred to or called him by that name. In a particularity that cannot be missed, I was also made to understand that it is not good to speak the full name or even just the first name of older relatives. Indeed, the culture socializes its young to a non-use and eventual forgetting of the first names of their elders.⁴ I had had to learn to distinguish between social settings when I could and when I should not ask young persons for the names of their parents.⁵

More important for my own further education, Sonny Boy Talasan’s incidental mention of “Datu Kunog-kunog” gives me a fourth name for his grandfather. It was in fact the first time that I have ever heard of it. When I commented so, the kibitzers during the recording all smiled. One pointed out that when a man becomes a datu, he is given another name. In Mandublas’s case, it was “Datu Kunog-kunog.” Many adults in the village apparently know it but rarely use it. Instead, Nabawang adults today use “Amay”—*amay* is the Pulangiyen word for father, *inay* for mother. He stands indeed at the head of by far the largest kin group in Nabawang today.

Thanks to another part of the same recording, there may be a fifth name for his grandfather. The “Man-iluyan” and “Nay-iluyan” in the recording certainly elicited an alertness question from me. My teachers in the village explained that when a man and a woman are wed, they are given new names. There is no shortage of illustrative examples they could give. So, when Celestino Ampildon and Angelina Loquindo were wed, they would have been given new names? Naturally! However, nobody in Nabawang today seems to recall what these were. Nobody knows what he was more commonly called during his bachelor days. Nobody in Nabawang today can name—by

whichever naming system—any of this datu's siblings or cousins, if he had any at all, in whichever nearby or far away villages they may be found.

As in many other places in Southeast Asia, teknonymy is practiced by the Pulangiyan, specifically in connection with the eldest child. When Sonny Boy was given his name soon after his birth, his parents began being called "Man-Sonny-Boy" (or "Amay-Sonny-Boy") and "Inay-Sonny-Boy" (or the shortened "Nay-Sonny-Boy"). Every other parent in Nabawang has some similar name; those who had a child by a formal remarriage receive additional such names. Over the course of many weekend visits to Nabawang since April of 2011, I have also heard "Papa-Sonny-Boy" and "Mama-Sonny-Boy" used to refer to or directly address Nestor and Susan. For his part, Celestino Ampildon became "Mandublas" when his eldest, a son, was given a name. The datu is also "Amay-Duglas" and how the "g" became a "b" is another story waiting to be told.

Sonny Boy's use of "Man-iluyan" and "Nay-iluyan" is also interesting for the avoidance of the more commonly used "Man-Sonny-Boy" and "Inay-Sonny-Boy." He and his siblings have never used these latter two terms in my hearing. Yet I have heard all eight siblings use the teknonyms for other parents in the community. The parallel situation I have observed in other children and youth with respect to their own parents and other parents in the community. I have heard mothers and fathers use teknonyms to address each other. Surely these are still facets of the actual use of Pulangiyan kinship-linked terms.

All of the above would seem so far removed from more critical and immediate concerns of the mission to the indigenous peoples. We Jesuits, however, know that the matter is part of seeking to find God already at work and at play in every part of creation, human languages and cultures included. In finding God, we praise and celebrate God, and pray we may be found worthy of the sharing in the suffering as well.

A second concerns culture contact and change. At the time of the recording, Sonny Boy was on a short leave from the Malaybalay Stock Farm so he could be in Nabawang. He had accepted to be the Commencement Speaker at the grade school graduation ceremonies in the neighboring village.

He had graduated from the same school. His teachers there were happy and proud of him, in part because he had a college degree.

Time was when Pulangiyan elders did not look kindly at the idea of allowing their children to go to school. Back in 1993-1995, many older people in the territory—Datu Mandublas included—in fact expressed to me a generalized evaluation of schools being bad for their culture, destructive even. This, even if, on some other occasion, many also expressed they valued literacy. As best as I could make sense of the matter, it was not schools *per se* that the elders found problematic. Rather, going to school meant constant contact with the non-Pulangiyan, in the process giving the young all sorts of ideas. One major underlying anathematic was the challenge to the authority of elders and the accustomed ways, not in the least in connection with boy-girl relationships and control of marriages.

None of Datu Mandublas's generation ever went to elementary school, for there were no grade schools yet in the territory when they were little children. In time, the schools were set up. Within the childhood of his nine offsprings, the resistance to schooling must have begun to meltdown. At least two of the datu's older sons apparently never went to school. On the other hand, the three youngest apparently did. Of these three, only the youngest daughter, Susan, finished elementary school.

She went on to high school. That high school was about thirty kilometers away, at the center of the town to the south of Nabawang. It was set up by an Italian Jesuit missionary who, after so many tries, finally convinced Datu Mandublas to allow his youngest daughter to attend high school. The priest paid for her school fees and allowed her free board and lodging at the dormitory he built for the tribal students. For some reason or other, she stopped after a year. Even so, Susan is the first Nabawang native to have ever had some high school education.

Susan's children are part of the story. As of this writing, the youngest had just completed a year at the village pre-school. Susan and Nestor intend to send this youngest one to formal grade school this coming school year, no matter that the nearest school is about three kilometers away. Of the seven older children, the youngest two are still in grade school and one more in

high school. The parents also intend to keep these three in school for the coming school year.

The four oldest children have completed high school.⁶ All four have been to college. The fourth stopped after a year, primarily due to lack of funds; she went to Cagayan de Oro City to find a job but still hopes to resume her college in the near future. The second oldest is still in college, and the parents intend to let him continue this coming school year. The third eldest received a BS Education degree in March 2013. The eldest, Sonny Boy, had his BS Agriculture in March 2011. He is the first Nabawang resident ever to finish college.

Datu Mandublas died in 1996. He would be happy, I think, that despite nine years of schooling and then a job in overwhelmingly Bisaya-speaking communities, Sonny Boy considers himself to be *intaelæk ta Pulangiyen*.

Notes

- 1 The free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) norm was followed. The main speaker readily agreed to be recorded. He and both his parents consented to the use of the recording in this writer's classes. After seeing the transcript and others like it, the three also consented for these to be used in any essay or book of this writer.
- 2 There is actually a fifth, although perhaps only a trained linguist could have picked it out or would have unhesitatingly classified it as an interjection.
- 3 To this writer's best knowledge, the *hi* never starts a sentence and hence is apparently syntax-linked.
- 4 From a study of the data available then, there might indeed be an advantage of such non-use especially in connection with Pulangiyen marriage alliances. That will have to wait for another occasion.
- 5 In the light of that, Sonny Boy Talasan's reference to "Nestor" and "Susan" could not fail to elicit from me a comment. The implied question also did not fail to elicit the expected response and adjustment from both the older and the younger residents. What was noticeable and begs further probing via discreet inquiry is this: The younger ones seemed to take the cultural practice with a shrug.
- 6 If the side story be important for the record, three of these four children finished secondary education at the high school which is only about twelve kilometers away on foot. A Filipino Jesuit built that high school soon after the local parish was established. Still another Jesuit had a hand in the genesis of the village pre-school.