

Phonological Analysis of Tagalog

Kristina Guevarra
ENG 582
December 5, 2015

Background

Tagalog is the national language of the Philippines, where it is the primary or secondary language for over 90 percent of the population. While there are a number of regional dialects spoken throughout the thousands of islands that make up the Philippines, Tagalog is the official national dialect that is spoken in and around the capital of Manila.

Other related languages in the same group include Bikol, Bisayan, and Mansakan, which are all found in central Philippines. It is a member of the Western-Malayo-Polynesian set of Austronesian languages, and it serves as a lingua franca that unites numerous ethnic groups and dialects throughout the country (Schacter, 2009, p. 833). The most common core root words in Tagalog can be traced back to a group of Malayo-Polynesian roots. Loan words have been sourced from a wide variety of languages, including Sanskrit, Dravidian, Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, and English (Fonacier, 2010, p. 97).

Vowels

There are five vowel phonemes in modern Tagalog:

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

The two front vowels (/i/, /e/) and the two back vowels (/u/, /o/) were previously considered allophones of single phonemes, but extensive foreign

contact and borrowings have led to an expansion of the vowel inventory (Schachter, 2009, p. 834).

Diphthongs

There are six diphthongs found in Tagalog:

	Front	Central	Back
High	iw		uy
Mid	ey		oy
Low		ay aw	

All diphthongs in Tagalog consist of vowel that precedes a /w/ or /y/ in the same syllable (/Vw/, /Vy/).

/ 'gi liw/ 'sweetheart

/ 'si siw/ 'baby chicken'

However, when a /w/ or /y/ occurs intervocalically (/VwV/, /VyV/), it marks the beginning of a new syllable with the following vowel, rather than forming a diphthong with the preceding vowel (Stockwell, 1957, p. B-22).

/ 'bu wan/ 'moon'

/i ni 'wi sik/ 'was sprinkled'

Vowel Length, Stress, and Rhythm

Vowels in Tagalog may be long or short, depending on where they fit into a phrase. Phrase-final syllables are usually long in native words, while non-final syllables are short. In borrowed words, non-phrase-final syllables may also be long (Schachter, 2009, p. 834). Tagalog vowels are shortest when they are immediately following a glottal stop /ʔ/. Median vowel length occurs under weak stress and in closed syllables. Vowels in an open syllable that occur under strong

stress are noticeably longer (Stockwell, 1957, p. B-19). Stress is usually assigned to the ultimate or penultimate syllable. A shift in word stress from ultimate to penultimate can cause a difference in meaning. Stressed syllables are also lengthened unless they are word-final (Ramos & Cena, 1990, p. 11).

- /gá:bi/ ‘yam’ /gabí/ ‘night’
- /búkas/ ‘tomorrow’ /bukás/ ‘open’
- /salitá/ ‘word; speak’
- /bá:hay/ ‘house’
- /asá:wa/ ‘spouse’

Secondary stress can be found in longer words, appearing at least two syllables before the primary stress.

- /nàgsiʔáhon/ ‘went up’
- /màkaʔágaw/ ‘seize’
- /àʔakyatín/ ‘will be closed’
- /kaʔàbalahán/ ‘trouble’

Tagalog is a syllable-timed language, where each syllable is given an equal length of time to pronounce. (Stockwell, 1957, p. B-47). Intonation in Tagalog is relatively level, with a slight fall at the end of statements and a slight rise at the end of questions (Ramos & Guzman, 1971, p.39).

Aspiration occurs on vowels that appear in the absolute final position:

V^h/___]_{word} vs. VC/___]_{word}. Vowel nasality occurs when a vowel is preceded by a nasal consonant /m, n, ŋ/. This trait is strongest with the velar nasal /ŋ/ (Stockwell, 1957, p. B-20). In phrase-final position, the two front vowels /i, e/

and the two back vowels /u, o/ may freely vary without affecting meaning (Ramos & Cena, 1990, p. 8)

Kumanta tayo ‘let’s sing’

Kumanta tayu ‘let’s sing’

Consonants

There are a total of 16 consonants that are found in native Tagalog words:

	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Voiceless stop	p	t			k	ʔ
Voiced stop	b	d			g	
Nasal	m	n			ŋ	
Fricative			s			h
Lateral			l			
Tap or Trill			r			
Glide	w			y		

Tagalog has used the Roman alphabet for several centuries, following Spanish colonization. One major influence on the phonology of modern Tagalog is the pervasiveness of the English language in the Philippines, where it is widely taught as a second language across all levels of education. English is widely written and understood throughout the Philippines; however, it takes on a distinctly Filipino dialect with frequent Tagalog code-switching, known as Taglish. All 26 letters used in the English language are used in modern written Tagalog, but seven of these letters are typically limited to foreign names and other lexical borrowings (*c, f, j, q, v, x, z*). The orthography of Tagalog is relatively

shallow, with a strong correlation between the pronunciation and the spelling. However, it does not reflect stress or vowel length (Schachter, 2009, p. 836).

Consonantal Features

One phonological feature in Tagalog is that voiceless stops are not aspirated (/p, t, k/), when they occur in the beginning of a stressed syllable. Voiceless and voiced stops are also typically unreleased in final position (Stockwell, 1957, p. B-24):

- /kánin/ ‘cooked rice’
- /túbìg/ ‘water’
- /salát̚/ ‘needy’
- /agod̚/ ‘dipper’

Syllable Structures

Tagalog allows four open syllable structures, as well as eight possible closed syllable structures. The most commonly found structure consists of (C) V (C). A single V is the smallest, while the maximum can be either CCVCC or CS-VVS-VC. (Llamzon, 1966, p. 34)

Open Syllables

V	/ʔe/	‘an expression’
CV	/mó/	‘your’
CCV	/psə/	(expression of contempt)
S-VV	/yí/	‘a nickname’

(Llamzon, 1966, p. 34)

Closed Syllables

VC	/ʔaŋ/	‘the’
CVC	/pák/	(sound of an explosion)
CVCC	/kómiks/	‘comics’
CCVCC	/tramp/	‘trump’
CCVC	/trák/	‘truck’
VS-V	/ʔúy/	(expression of surprise)
CVS-V	/hóy/	‘hey’
CS-VVC	/tyák/	‘certain’

(Llamzon, 1966, p. 34)

The most frequent syllable patterns of CV and CVC are found in final and non-final syllables, with CV: only occurring in non-final syllables. A wide range of CC clusters may occur when following a CVC syllable in a disyllabic word (Schachter, 2009, p. 835).

Conclusion

The phonology of Tagalog has continued to evolve in response to outside influences and internal changes. The sound system maintains a strong connection to its Austronesian roots, despite the intensity and duration of occupation by Spanish- and English-speaking forces.

References

- Fonacier, E. (2010). Tagalog in the USA. In K. Potowski (Ed.), *Language diversity in the USA* (pp. 96-109). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Llamzon, T. (1966). *Tagalog phonology*. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 8(1), 30-39.
- Ramos, T., & Cena, R. (1990). *Modern Tagalog: Grammatical explanations and exercises for non-native speakers*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Ramos, T., & Guzman, V. (1971). *Tagalog for beginners*,. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Schachter, P. (2009). Tagalog. In B. Comrie (Ed.), *The World's major languages* (2nd ed., pp. 833-855). London: Routledge.
- Stockwell, R. (1957). *A contrastive analysis of English and Tagalog*. Westwood, California: University of California, Los Angeles.