Reflexives in Adult and Child Tagalog

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1. Introduction

In trying to understand how children acquire language, we must consider numerous factors. One factor is processing considerations: children learn the language with memory limitations, with a developing parser, developing abilities for lexical retrieval, etc. A second set of considerations involve the mechanisms for thematic role assignment. Typically, this happens by reference to canonical word order or case marking, if available in their language. Other factors such as verb semantics and animacy also play a role. The final major component to this picture is the knowledge of grammar – whether and to what degree children come pre-equipped with knowledge of human grammar that helps them solve the numerous logical problems in language acquisition.

We address some of these factors in Tagalog, which has a voice system that raises interesting issues with regard to canonical word order. Moreover, there is a rich system of case marking that interacts with voice to yield variable word order. These three aspects of Tagalog syntax conspire to make Tagalog a language that potentially teaches us something about canonicity and thematic role assignments in child language.

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1GLOSS: 3SG = third person singular pronoun; AV = agent voice; EXP = experiencer; LOC = locative; NPVT = non-pivot or non-focused element; PVT = pivot or focused element; PRF = perfective aspect; PRT = particle; REFL = reflexive; VAP = verb-agent-patient word order; VAR = verb-agent-reflexive word order; VPA = verb-patient-agent word order; VRA = verb-reflexive-agent word order

2. Typological features of Tagalog
2.1. Tagalog syntax

Tagalog, a verb-initial language, employs a system where voice affixation selects an element and syntactically privileges it. This privileged argument is often referred to as the pivot. Voice affixation cross-references the thematic role of the pivot. In an agent voice pattern (AV; 1), the verb is marked with an infix -um-, which entails the verb is in the agent voice. The nominal lalaki ‘boy’ is marked with the pivot marker aŋ, which indicates ‘boy’ is the agent, while babae ‘girl’ is marked with the non-pivot marker naŋ, identifying it as the patient. In a patient voice pattern (PV; 2), the verb is marked with -in-. The argument marked as the pivot is the patient, while the non-pivot marked argument is the agent (Schachter, 2015).

(1) a. Agent Voice (AV) pattern, Verb-Agent-Patient (VAP) word order
   $H^{<um>abol \ aŋ \ lalaki \ naŋ \ babae}$.
   $<AV.PRF>chase \ PVT \ boy \ NPVT \ girl$
   ‘The boy chased a girl.’

   b. AV pattern, Verb-Patient-Agent (VPA) word order
   $H^{<um>abol \ naŋ \ babae \ aŋ \ lalaki}$.
   $<AV.PRF>chase \ NPVT \ girl \ PVT \ boy$
   ‘The boy chased a girl.’

(2) a. Patient Voice (PV) pattern, VAP word order
   $H^{<in>abol \ naŋ \ lalaki \ aŋ \ babae}$.
   $<PV.PRF>chase \ NPVT \ boy \ PVT \ girl$
   ‘The boy chased the girl.’

   b. PV pattern, VPA word order
   $H^{<in>abol \ aŋ \ babae \ naŋ \ lalaki}$.
   $<PV.PRF>chase \ PVT \ girl \ NPVT \ boy$
   ‘The boy chased the girl.’

Word order in Tagalog is flexible; either verb-agent-patient (1a, 2a) or verb-patient-agent (1b, 2b) patterns are acceptable. There is debate in Tagalog linguistics as to the canonical word order: there have been some claims that the canonical word order is agent-first (e.g., Schachter, 2015), pivot-last (e.g., Himmelmann, 2005), or that both agent-first and pivot-last principles apply (e.g., Kroeger, 1993). To date, there is no agreement on this issue.

While there is no consensus view on how Tagalog syntax works, there are some basic assumptions that are well-motivated. First, with the agent voice pattern, the agent voice marked verb indicates that the pivot marked nominal is the agent of the clause. In the spirit of the large body of research that links
thematic roles with particular structural positions (e.g., UTAH (Baker, 1988), Chen, 2017, amongst others), we assume the agent is mapped onto a high structural position. The other nominal, marked as non-pivot, is the patient and is mapped onto a lower structural position. We remain agnostic as to the details of any further structural representations.

Likewise, when the verb is marked patient voice, the pivot-marked nominal is assigned the patient role, and is mapped onto a lower structural position. And the other argument, marked the non-pivot, is the agent and is mapped onto a higher structural position.

Thus on this two-part system, a Tagalog speaker/listener needs to attend to two pieces of information in order to determine an argument’s thematic role (and thus its structural position in the tree): voice affixation on the verb and the case marking on each noun (more specifically, the pivot case marking). Moreover, word order plays no role in any of this.

2.2. Reflexives in Tagalog

Native speakers informally judge that both voice patterns are possible in sentences with reflexives (3-4). When the verb is in the agent voice (3), the reflexive is non-pivot marked, and when the verb is in patient voice (4), the reflexive is pivot marked. And as is the case with regular (non-reflexive) transitive patterns, word order is also flexible. Hence, while (3a) and (4a) are in the verb-agent-reflexive word (VAR) order, (3b) and (4b) illustrate the reversed order of arguments, which are also acceptable.

(3) a. AV pattern, pivot-agent, Verb-Agent-Reflexive (VAR) word order
Nag-kamot aŋ lalaki naŋ sarili niya.
<AV.PRF>scratch PVT boy NPVT self 3 SG
‘The boy scratched himself.’

b. AV pattern, pivot-agent, Verb-Reflexive-Agent (VRA) word order
Nag-kamot naŋ sarili niya aŋ lalaki.
<AV.PRF>scratch NPVT self 3 SG PVT boy
‘The boy scratched himself.’

(4) a. PV pattern, pivot-reflexive, VAR word order
K<in>amot naŋ lalaki aŋ sarili niya.
<PV.PRF>scratch NPVT boy PVT self 3 SG
‘The boy scratched himself.’

b. PV pattern, pivot-reflexive, VRA word order
K<in>amot aŋ sarili niya naŋ lalaki.
<PV.PRF>scratch PVT self 3 SG NPVT boy
‘The boy scratched himself.’
While voice and word order are variable in sentences with reflexives, case cannot be reversed. Specifically, AV disallows the reflexive as the pivot, as shown in (5). Similarly, in PV, only the reflexive can be the pivot, as illustrated in (6). This applies to both word order patterns, as shown in the following:

(5) a. AV pattern, pivot-reflexive, VRA word order  
*Nag-kamot aŋ sarili niya naŋ lalaki.  
<AV.PRF>scratch PVT self 3SG NPVT boy  
‘*Himself scratched the boy.’

b. AV pattern, pivot-reflexive, VAR word order  
*Nag-kamot naŋ lalaki aŋ sarili niya.  
<AV.PRF>scratch NPVT boy PVT self 3SG  
‘*Himself scratched the boy.’

(6) a. PV pattern, pivot-agent, VAR word order  
*K<in>amot aŋ lalaki naŋ sarili niya.  
<PV.PRF>scratch PVT boy NPVT self 3SG  
‘*Himself scratched the boy.’

b. PV pattern, pivot-agent, VRA word order  
*K<in>amot naŋ sarili niya aŋ lalaki.  
<PV.PRF>scratch NPVT self 3SG PVT boy  
‘*Himself scratched the boy.’

Given the structural assumptions we offered earlier in our paper, the case facts (5-6) find a natural explanation. With the agent voice pattern, the pivot-marked nominal is assigned the agent role, and therefore mapped onto a structurally high position. But (5) incorrectly maps the reflexive onto a structurally high position, resulting in a Principle A violation. Likewise, with a verb marked patient voice, the pivot-marked nominal is mapped onto a structurally low position. This incorrectly maps the lexical agent (antecedent to the reflexive) onto a structurally low position, which again results in a Principle A violation.

We summarize the interplay of voice, case, and word order in sentences with reflexives in Table 1. We label each of these patterns with the letters (a) through (h), which we will be relying on for ease of reference henceforth.
Table 1. Summary of the various patterns involving the reflexive in Tagalog.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Case Marking</th>
<th>Word Order</th>
<th>Pattern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AV</td>
<td>P vortex-Agent</td>
<td>aŋ-Agent naŋ-Reflexive</td>
<td>(a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>naŋ-Reflexive aŋ-Agent</td>
<td>(b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*P vortex-Reflexive</td>
<td>*naŋ-Agent aŋ-Reflexive</td>
<td>*(c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*aŋ-Reflexive naŋ-Agent</td>
<td>*(d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV</td>
<td>*P vortex-Agent</td>
<td>*aŋ-Agent naŋ-Reflexive</td>
<td>*(e)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*naŋ-Reflexive aŋ-Agent</td>
<td>*(f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P vortex-Reflexive</td>
<td>naŋ-Agent aŋ-Reflexive</td>
<td>(g)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>aŋ-Reflexive naŋ-Agent</td>
<td>(h)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Objectives

This study has three main objectives: (1) to experimentally verify the informal judgments (herefore never reported or verified) on reflexive sentences presented above; (2) to explore whether these judgments are obeyed in Tagalog child language, suggesting adherence to the structural assumptions spelled out earlier, as well as adherence to Principle A; and, (3) to determine the relative roles of voice, case marking, and word order in the interpretation of sentences with reflexives.

4. Frequency of Sentences with Reflexives from Corpus Data

The frequency of sentences with reflexives in Tagalog were determined using a corpus of the Filipino Early Language Child Developmental Database (Marzan, 2009), which consists of 78 30-minute video recordings of six Tagalog-speaking children from ages 1;2 – 5;0. All adult-child interactions were transcribed using the CHAT format. A search of all utterances containing the reflexive sarili from both adults and children was made using the CLAN program (MacWhinney, 2003). The voice morphology, word order patterns, and syntactic correctness based on the contexts of these utterances were analyzed.

Out of the 39,210 adult utterances, there were 37 utterances with the reflexive in the adult input. Four utterances were excluded, which included the use of the reflexive as an attributive (3 hits, e.g., his own/self body), and the use of the reflexive in an existential clause to indicate possession (1 hit). We obtained a final count of 33/39,210 adult utterances (0.000842%) containing the reflexive (Table 2). Despite the low number of reflexive sentences, there was variation with the sentential patterns containing the reflexive. There was a preference for verb-agent/experiencer-reflexive order (i.e., reflexive-final order), and there were no ungrammatical patterns (e.g., 5, 6) obtained from the adult input.
Table 2. List of the various patterns with the reflexive from the adult input.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Affix</th>
<th>Verb Type</th>
<th>Word Order</th>
<th>Hits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intransitive Clauses</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>mag-</td>
<td>regular</td>
<td>V anŋ-Agent sa-Refl</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencer</td>
<td>ma-</td>
<td>perception</td>
<td>V naŋ-Exp anŋ-Refl</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitive Clauses</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencer</td>
<td>bare</td>
<td>perception</td>
<td>V naŋ-Exp anŋ-Refl</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ma-</td>
<td>perception</td>
<td>V naŋ-Exp anŋ-Refl</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>V1 naŋ-Exp [V2 PRO anŋ-Refl]</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>-in-</td>
<td>regular</td>
<td>V naŋ-Agent anŋ-Refl</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locative</td>
<td>-an</td>
<td>regular</td>
<td>V naŋ-Agent anŋ-Refl</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>V1 naŋ-Agent [V2 PRO anŋ-Refl]</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for children, they produce reflexives at similarly low rates. There were only 2 utterances including reflexives out of the 15,235 propositional child utterances. One of these two utterances were excluded as the reflexive was used as an attributive, leaving just one reflexive utterance (1/15,235, 0.0000656%). Moreover, this single utterance was erroneous in that there was no voice affix on the verb and the reflexive argument was left (ungrammatically) caseless (7).

(7) *kasi kain niya sarili niya e
because eat 3SG self 3SG PRT
‘*because he eat himself’

This corpus analysis demonstrates that children seldom produce sentences with reflexives, and they rarely hear it from adults. When children hear it, the reflexive is used in varying patterns.

5. Two Experiments

Given the scarcity of reflexives in the input to children, we expected Tagalog children to have difficulty with reflexive patterns. However, extant research on Tagalog acquisition has shown children to manifest a word order bias, rather than to rely on the more dependable voice and case cues (Tanaka, 2016; Garcia, Dery, Roese, & Höhle, 2018): in transitive (non-reflexive) sentences, children generally prefer Verb-Agent-Patient word order. When it comes to reflexives, using word order cues may lead to incorrectly accepting sentences like (c) and (e) in Table 1, since these patterns match the preferred word order. We predicted that children would manifest a word order bias on their production and interpretation of sentences with reflexives, and therefore to permit structurally ungrammatical forms. We conducted a sentence completion task (production) and a forced-choice acceptability task with both children and adults.
5.1. Experiment 1: Sentence production task

5.1.1. Participants

Twenty-six normal adults, age 22-70 (mean = 47.5) and 17 children, age 3;2-6;1 (mean = 5;0) participated in this task.

5.1.2. Method

Participants were shown pictures depicting reflexive/transitive actions (e.g., a girl spraying herself with water, see Figure 1). They heard an audio-recorded verb with the voice affix (recall that Tagalog is verb-initial), and they were asked to complete the sentences. Using this method, we were able to control the voice of the verb, and participants therefore had to decide on which word order, case pattern and nominal to use to complete the sentence. Each critical item set (reflexives) and control item set (non-reflexive transitives) consisted of five verbs in AV and five in PV, which totaled 20 items. Two lists that differed in item sequence were also prepared; participants were randomly assigned to either one of these two lists.

Figure 1. Sample reflexive (left) and transitive (right) item.

We expected variation with participant responses, given that the nature of the task allowed participants to respond in many different ways, including sentences that do not use the reflexive. For example, in English, participants could respond to the reflexive picture in Figure 1 (left) with “the girl splashed herself,” “the hose splashed the girl,” or “water splashed her face.” This is also true in Tagalog.

5.1.3. Results

As anticipated, we obtained a significant number of responses that did not involve the reflexive. In the reflexive condition, roughly 46.54% (121/260) of adult responses and 72.35% (123/170) of child responses did not include a reflexive. We conducted all subsequent analyses on the remaining responses that did contain a reflexive.

Of these reflexive responses, among adults in the AV condition, 76% of responses were those in which the antecedent precedes the reflexive, and about 14% were those in which the reflexive precedes the antecedent. These responses (which constitute the majority) are all correctly case marked (pivot on antecedent)
and do not violate anything structural, i.e., they all map the antecedent onto a structurally high position, and the reflexive onto a structurally low position. There was only one erroneous response in which the reflexive is pivot-marked.

Likewise, in the PV condition, 85% of responses involved the agent preceding the reflexive, and none involved a pivot-marked agent.

Table 3. Final responses from the adults in the sentence production task.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AV (out of 56 responses)</th>
<th>PV (out of 83 responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response Categories</strong></td>
<td><strong>Response Categories</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) AV an-Agent naŋ-Refl</td>
<td>76.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) AV naŋ-Refl an-Agent</td>
<td>14.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other responses</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-argument responses</td>
<td>7.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) AV naŋ-Agent an-Refl</td>
<td>1.82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children produced many more non-target responses: 70.81% in the AV and 56.53% in the PV. Of the remaining target-like responses, almost all of them exhibit an order in which the antecedent precedes the reflexive. A smaller proportion of responses in both AV and PV were errors involving case assignment.

Table 4. Final responses from the children in the sentence production task.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AV (out of 24 responses)</th>
<th>PV (out of 23 responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response Categories</strong></td>
<td><strong>Response Categories</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) AV an-Agent naŋ-Refl</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) AV naŋ-Refl an-Agent</td>
<td>4.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other responses</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-argument responses</td>
<td>58.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive as an attributive</td>
<td>4.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) AV an-Refl naŋ-Agent</td>
<td>4.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing nominal marker</td>
<td>4.16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To summarize, adults primarily demonstrated an agent-reflexive word order preference in both voice patterns, almost without any case marking errors. While the children tended to have agent-reflexive word order in the grammatical responses, they also produced ungrammatical patterns, which mostly involved incorrect case assignment. The source of these errors is as yet unclear in that we do not know if the difficulty posed with reflexive utterances is case marking (and the associated mapping to structural positions), or the preference for agent-patient word order, or a difficulty with Principle A.
5.2. Experiment 2: Forced choice task

From our findings in the production task, we attempted to determine the relative effect of the factors case, voice, and word order in the interpretation of sentences with reflexives using a two-choice forced choice task (similar to a felicity judgment task; see Chierchia, Crain, Guasti, Gualmini, & Meroni, 2001).

5.2.1. Participants

Twenty-two adults (22-70, mean 47.86) and 13 children (3;2-6;0, mean 4;10) participated in this task.

5.2.2. Method

Participants were shown a picture (boxed in Figure 2), and heard an audio-recorded sentence from each of the two boys. They were instructed to point to the boy who sounded better in describing the picture (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Sample item in the forced choice task.

The selection of the sentence pairs (following the letter-labels presented in Table 1) allowed testing for one variable while controlling for the other variables. The first set of pairs involved patterns (a)-(c) and (e)-(g), which allowed us to control voice and word order while testing for case marking. Note that one member of each pair is grammatical and the other is ungrammatical; hence, these comparisons tested whether the participants preferred the grammatical over the ungrammatical sentences.

The second set compared (a)-(b) and (g)-(h). With these comparisons, each member of the pair is in the same voice, and the reflexive has the correct case marking in each pattern. Only word order differed for each pair. This comparison therefore allowed us to test whether participants have a preference for one word order over the other.

Finally, we compared (a)-(g) and (b)-(h). In this comparison, each member of the pair differed in terms of the voice but also the case marking on the reflexive. But crucially, word order was held constant (i.e., the antecedent was followed by
the reflexive). With these comparisons, we tested whether there was a preference for one voice pattern over the other.

Three verbs were crossed with the six pairwise comparisons, creating 18 critical reflexive items. The same three verbs were crossed with the same six pairwise comparisons, which created 18 control non-reflexive items. From these 36 items, two lists were created that differed in item sequence. All items were pseudo-randomized.

For each comparison, counts to an indicated preference for a sentence pattern was made. We also determined whether the likelihood of choosing one sentence over another is beyond chance using a mixed effects logistic regression, with participants and items as random effects.

**Figure 3.** Results of the forced choice task for adults (top) and children (bottom).
5.2.3. Results

Among the items that involved a case marking difference, the adults strongly favored the (a) pattern in the AV ($\beta = -6.53, SE = 2.70, z = -2.41, p < 0.05$) and the (g) pattern in the PV ($\beta = -2.65, SE = 0.94, z = -2.83, p < 0.01$). This entailed that the (a) and (g) patterns, both of which are judged by native speakers as the grammatical patterns in these pairs, were experimentally verified as by far the preferred patterns. However, unlike adults, children showed no preference for either pattern in the AV ($p = 0.90$). They did, however, demonstrate sensitivity to case marking by preferring the (g) pattern ($\beta = 0.69, SE = 0.34, z = 2.04, p < 0.05$).

As for the patterns that involved word order differences, adults did not prefer any pattern in the AV ($p = 0.99$). However, in the PV, the agent preceding the reflexive is significantly preferred ($\beta = -7.38, SE = 2.45, z = -3.02, p < 0.01$). Children showed no preference for one word order or the other in the AV ($p = 0.67$) nor in the PV ($p = 0.27$).

Looking at the comparison pairs that involve voice differences, adults showed a preference for PV among agent-reflexive word order patterns ($\beta = 1.61, SE = 0.33, z = 4.87, p < 0.001$). In reflexive-agent word order patterns, there does not seem to be a preference for one voice over the other ($p = 0.34$). Among children, children show no preference for either voice in agent-reflexive patterns ($p = 0.42$) nor in reflexive-agent patterns ($p = 0.23$).

The results of the forced choice task revealed how adults demonstrated a strong dependence on using voice and case to assess the grammaticality of sentences with reflexives. They also showed an overwhelmingly strong preference for the Patient Voice in the agent-reflexive word order. In contrast, our Tagalog child participants were only able to use case to assess the grammaticality of Patient Voice in the agent-reflexive patterns. They, however, failed to demonstrate a preference for any word order pattern or voice in our experiment.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study confirmed the informal judgments which we reported earlier on reflexive sentences, which was the first ever experimental study on reflexives in Tagalog. Through our two experiments, we demonstrated the strong preference of adults for the Patient Voice for sentences with reflexives. Children showed only a weak degree of sensitivity to Patient Voice, as observed in the forced choice task. With the addition of word order as a factor, adults preferred the agent-reflexive word order in both the sentence completion and forced choice task. Children showed some agent-reflexive word order tendencies in the completion task, but none in the forced choice task. That there was no significant finding in the forced choice task in any of the comparisons, except in PV pairs that involved case marking difference, may mean that the structural properties of Tagalog syntax in the PV seemed to just be emerging for the children.

Despite reflexives being vanishingly rare in children’s environment, our production data showed that children preferred the PV verb in the agent-reflexive
order (just like adults). We have also shown that children tended to prefer the order in which the antecedent precedes the reflexive, showing that, all else being equal, Tagalog children tended to prefer orders in which the linear order maps directly on to relative hierarchical word order (an isomorphic preference), although this was a weak effect.

The investigation of Tagalog reflexives offers a good case to explore whether children might violate Principle A. There is ample reason to think that all case options are available with reflexives, but it looks like children know the structural requirements on reflexives (i.e., Principle A). Despite the limited number of participants and items in our current study, our child participants showed some degree of sensitivity to legal versus illegal case marking patterns in their comprehension of reflexive (at least in the patient voice). More investigation on Tagalog reflexives may focus on exploring age differences on the acquisition of reflexive patterns, as well as the use of various methods to investigate these patterns.

References


