

Micro-histories of Philippine languages: A study in linguistic stratigraphy

Maria Kristina S. Gallego
University of the Philippines Diliman

The Philippines occupies an important position in the dispersal of Austronesian speakers as it is assumed to be the first landing point out of homeland Taiwan. There is thus much interest regarding the development of the Philippine languages, but debates on the nature of their relationship continue to persist, and it remains uncertain whether the similarities found among the languages are due to shared ancestry under a single proto-language (Blust 2019, 2020, Zorc 2020) or an outcome of a linkage history (Liao 2020, Reid 2020, Ross 2020).

Considering case studies on specific languages and lower-order subgroups across the Philippines presents a more complex picture. For instance, we can observe parallel morphological paradigms that distinguish native and non-native materials in the Batanic language Ibatan (Gallego 2022), variation in common noun articles, pronouns, and conjunctions in the Bisayan language Porohanon (Santiago 2024), and the simplification of some morphological paradigms in the Southern Mindanao languages (Dumoran 2025). These outcomes are argued to be the result of a complex sociocultural history in the respective speech communities, which all involve intense contact with speakers of related languages. Other kinds of contact scenarios are also observable in the Philippines, such as those involving historical language shift among the non-Austronesian Negrito populations (Reid 1987, 1994), and the longstanding contact between speakers of the (non-Philippine) Sama-Bajaw language Abaknon with speakers of the neighboring Bisayan language Waray (Kaufman forthcoming).

These detailed case studies reveal layers of language change (i.e., linguistic stratigraphy), which can be linked to different phases in the histories of the speech communities. As a complement to Klamer (2019), this paper shifts away from the bird's eye (i.e., traditional macro-level models), and instead takes the worm's eye view in investigating the linguistic development in the Philippines (i.e., bottom-up, context-dependent micro-histories). Such direction for historical linguistics may offer more nuanced answers to ongoing debates and questions in the field.

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