



RESEARCH

Neutral and Abilitative/Involuntariness Morphology in Waray: A Comparative Analysis of the g- Prefix

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This paper seeks to evaluate the proposed g- prefix in Waray according to Dell's (1983) "Neutral (N) and Abilitative/involuntariness (AIA)" analysis for the closely related language Tagalog. Payne and Oyzon (2010) interpret the g- as a standalone morpheme denoting what they call "deliberate mood." Others see the g- as a part of the prefixes nag-, mag-, gin-, etc. (Rubino 2001, Diller 1971). I will demonstrate that Payne and Oyzon's "deliberate mood" is likely not necessary. Thus, my paper will provide an analysis that is preferable because it demonstrates that Waray agrees with other analyses in the Philippine-type literature. To accomplish this, I will use Waray data to show that when the g- prefix is used (here, interpreted as N morphology), the action only entails the maneuver and intention not the result, even though it may be heavily implied. Conversely, the AIA morphology entails the result, while not directly entailing either maneuver or intention. Thus, Dell's analysis for Tagalog works quite well for Waray and allows us to account for g- as "deliberate mood."

To view the tables referenced in this article, please download [this file](#).

1. Introduction

This brief paper aims to evaluate the proposed g- prefix in Waray according to the Neutral (N) and Abilitative/Involuntariness (AIA) analysis given by Dell (1983) for the closely related language Tagalog. Waray is an Austronesian language of the Philippines. Spoken east of Leyte and on most of the island of Samar, its distribution roughly corresponds to the area referred to as the Eastern Bisayas (Lobel 2013). It is the fifth most spoken language in the Philippines and is the language of wider communication in the Eastern Bisayas (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2023).

The exact meaning and parsing of the *g*- prefix in Waray is somewhat controversial. Payne and Oyzon (2020) interpret it as a standalone morpheme denoting what they call “deliberate mood” (cf. Cena 2014).¹ Others see the *g*- as a part of the prefixes *nag*-, *mag*-, *gin*-, etc. (Rubino 2001; Diller 1971). This analysis is in line with other closely related Philippine-type languages like Tagalog.

Whether the *g*- is a standalone prefix, as argued by Payne and Oyzon, or a part of other prefixes I leave to future research. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the *g*- prefix in Waray according to Dell’s N/AIA interpretation of Tagalog. Viewing the *g*- prefix in light of Dell’s analysis will give us a fresh look at Waray verbal morphology and aid the complex and controversial conversation that is the Philippine-type verbal system.

Section 2 lays the groundwork by explaining Dell’s study of Tagalog. In Section 3, I analyze Waray data following the N/AIA distinction. The Waray data I present here comes from my own fieldwork, collaborating with various Waray speakers. Because of this, many of the glosses are tentative (I note the more preliminary glosses where relevant). Section 4 briefly discusses the findings of my analysis and argues that the N/AIA interpretation is likely superior to others like “deliberate mood.” I conclude by arguing that Dell’s N/AIA analysis for Tagalog works well for Waray’s *g*- prefix, at least regarding *gin*-.

Due to the constraints of this paper, the analysis will be very preliminary but will hopefully open the door to further conversation.

2. The Neutral/Abilitative-Involuntariness Analysis of Tagalog

Dell (1983) examines the distinction in Tagalog morphology between “neutral” and “ability and involuntary action.” As traditionally understood, a phrase with the N marking entails that the actor had the intention of completing the action while also not entailing that the patient was affected. A phrase with the AIA form entails that the patient was affected as a result of the actor’s doing something, whether it was done intentionally or not. When there is no explicit patient in a given utterance, AIA morphology is seen as the culmination of the event, whereas the N morphology reflects the actor’s desire to complete this event.

Dell is concerned with analyzing whether there is a systematic ambiguity between an abilitative and involuntary reading for the AIA form in Tagalog. Dell argues that the “ability” and “involuntary-action” categories are not

¹ Payne and Oyzon (2020) define “deliberate mood events” as the following: “Deliberate events are normally those that actors go out of their way to perform. They are probably not something the actor normally does, but are special, conscious acts. The actor, usually a person, acts intentionally (on purpose) and controls the event. The actor is distinct from the affected participant.”

distinct senses. Rather, the AIA form is simply indeterminate as to whether the action was done according to the two possible readings, even if context usually makes it clear what reading was intended.

To accomplish this, Dell clarifies the difference between entailment and implication by invoking the notions of *maneuver* (M) and *result* (R). Dell offers the following notation, which explains the difference between N and AIA morphology:

$$\left| \begin{array}{l} \alpha N (V): \alpha M, \emptyset R \\ \alpha AIA (V): \alpha R \end{array} \right.$$

As Dell (1983) explains, this is essentially a convenient shorthand for making obvious the distinction where N sentences assert or deny whether a certain *maneuver* was performed regardless of the *result*, whereas AIA sentences assert or deny whether a *maneuver* brought about a certain *result*.

When applying this notion to the first example from Waray in Figure 1, we can see how the two forms work in context.² Although it is heavily implied that ‘I actually got him to speak,’ this is not strictly speaking an entailment because we can cancel it out with the following AIA verb *napilit* ‘force.’ Thus, the N verb only makes a claim about *maneuver* and does not actually entail anything with respect to *result*. The AIA verb, on the other hand, does directly entail the actor’s *maneuver* and its consequent *result*.

Dell then notes that, for N verbs, all situations that could be evoked by the verb share one feature: the end result could, at least in part, be different from the result the actor *intended* to achieve. Thus, N verbs are analyzed as yielding the following proposition:

$$\left| \begin{array}{l} \text{Intention(I):By acting as described in M, the agent intended to} \\ \text{bring about R.} \end{array} \right.$$

Dell refutes the traditional idea which posits the distinction for AIA verbs: that ABL is +I, αR , while INV is -I, αR . Dell argues that AIA sentences really have no systematic ambiguity between the abilitative and involuntary readings, instead opting for this paradigm:

$$\left| \begin{array}{l} \alpha N (V): \alpha(M \wedge I), \emptyset R \\ \alpha AIA (V): \emptyset I, \alpha R \end{array} \right.$$

² See supplementary file, table 2. *I have opted to adapt slightly other author’s glosses for ease of reading. For a full list of the abbreviations, see Appendix 1 and for the full alignment of glossed examples, see *Supplemental File: Interlinear Glosses*. The supplementary file provides the complete aligned glosses.

In essence, N verbs make no claim about the *result*, only being concerned with the *maneuver* and *intention*, as explained in the new definition of Intention. AIA verbs, on the other hand, make no claims about *intention*; they are only concerned with *result*.

3. Dell's Analysis Applied to the Proposed Waray *g-* Prefix

With this in view, the following section attempts to explain the proposed Waray *g-* prefix in terms of Dell's analysis of Tagalog. This preliminary analysis will show that using Dell's interpretation works well for Waray and that others, like "deliberate mood," are likely unnecessary.

As mentioned previously, the Waray data in this analysis comes from my own fieldwork. I elicited the data from speakers of the provinces Samar and Leyte, which is why there are some differences in case marking and word order. Because my focus is primarily on N and AIA morphology, the grammatical glosses used below are tentative. I also found it helpful to follow many of Dell's Tagalog examples to elicit the right kinds of data for Waray, as opposed to using English. (I often found it difficult to get examples that illustrate the point when using English.) Thus, the reader may notice that a similar template was used for many of my Waray examples.

3.1. *Neutral and Abilitative/Involuntariness Morphology in Waray*

Dell (1983) states that this distinction between the N and AIA forms in Tagalog is one of the most pervasive in the verbal inflectional paradigm. He gives two Tagalog examples (Figure 2).

The traditional analysis (Schachter and Otanes 1972) is that the two AIA interpretations are systematically ambiguous. One indicates the ability to accomplish the action, the other the involuntary or accidental occurrence of the action. An initial look, and in turning to Figures 3–5, we see Waray reveals a similar distinction in the verbal morphology.

I have included two AIA sentences that demonstrate that the same verb form is used when one wants to convey the abilitative reading (Figure 4) or the involuntary/accidental reading (Figure 5). When comparing the two languages, it is salient to note that the AIA form in Tagalog and Waray is the same, whereas the N form is slightly different; Tagalog has the infix *<in>*, and Waray appears to have the prefix *gin-*. When trying to add AIA morphology with the context in Figure 3 (Waray Example 2), a semantically ill-formed sentence is created in Figure 6 (Waray Example 5).

The final *karuyag* 'on purpose' phrase contradicts the *na-* morphology on the verb. This final phrase can be changed, however, which allows a more natural reading with the AIA morphology. See Waray Example 6 (Figure 7). Likewise, the AIA morphology on the verb in Waray Example 4 (Figure 5) cannot be

changed to the N prefix. This also creates a semantically ill-formed sentence, as shown in Example 7 (Figure 8). This final clause can, however, be changed to allow N morphology on the verb. See the sentence in Example 8 (Figure 9), where the final clause shows the purpose of the child's destruction of the chair.

Examples 9–12 (Figures 10–13) are offered, which illustrate this distinction. In this case, there is a difference in voice between Examples 9–10 and 11–12.

These examples show that the difference between the N and AIA forms is at least possible in Waray, if not a very common distinction. Table 1 demonstrates the Waray verbal morphology we have analyzed so far.

Assuming this analysis, we may conclude that the *g-* prefix in Waray has something to do with the N/AIA distinction. Before furthering this idea, however, let us incorporate the notions of *maneuver* and *result*.

3.2. *The Semantics of Maneuver and Result in Waray*

As already mentioned in Section 2, the essential difference between the N and AIA forms lies in the concepts of *maneuver* and *result*. Consider the Waray examples 13 and 14 (Figures 14–15), which were elicited based on some of Dell's Tagalog sentences.

While Example 13 may often imply that the man moves the rock because he pushed it, this *result* is not strictly entailed. The AIA verb in the second clause of the sentence in Example 14, however, does entail that the man moved the rock. To illustrate this subtle distinction, note the sentence below. The sentence in Example 15 (Figure 16) shows the same N morphology used in Example 13, but the final clause demonstrates that the rock was not actually moved.

Likewise, compare the following sentences. The sentence in Example 16 (Figure 17) usually carries the understanding that the man actually arrived at Manilla, but the fact that the sentence in Example 17 (Figure 18) is not contradictory demonstrates that this is not strictly entailed.

To follow Dell's paradigm, then, the second clause in Example 14 can only be true if the *result* is also true. The *maneuver* is not strictly entailed with AIA verbs, as Dell's refined paradigm above demonstrates. These two values, following the context given above amount to the following:

Maneuver: the man attempted to move the rock.

Result: the rock was moved.

The main takeaway, then, is that the AIA form entails *result*, while the N form only entails *maneuver* and *intention*, not making any strict claims about the *result*. This distinction makes clear the difference between examples 18 and 19 (Figures 19–20).

Examples 18 and 19 (Figures 19–20) differ only in their verbal morphology. The clause in Example 18, again, heavily implies that the man opens the door but does not actually entail this. The clause in Example 19, on the other hand, entails that the man exerted effort on the door and actually opened it. Thus, depending on the context, we could translate Example 19 as ‘the man managed to open the door’ or ‘the man accidentally opened the door.’

This distinction also explains variations in result clauses. See Examples 20 and 21 (Figures 21–22), which are nearly the same minus the verbs inside the result clauses.

Example 19 (Figure 20) describes a situation where the woman is surprised that the man lifted the rock rather than moving it by some other means. Example 20 describes a situation where the woman is surprised that he lifted it because she did not think he could accomplish the task. This alternation can be explained by appealing to these concepts of *maneuver* and *result*. In Example 19, the woman is surprised at the *maneuver*, while in Example 20, she is surprised at the *result* brought about by the man’s *maneuver*.

3.3. *Intention in Waray*

To restate Dell’s conclusions for Tagalog (already discussed in Section 2), here is the *intention* proposition along with the schema explaining the difference between N and AIA forms:

Intention(I): By acting as described in M, the agent intended to bring about R.

α N (V): $\alpha(M \wedge I), \emptyset R$

α AIA (V): $\emptyset I, \alpha R$

This analysis proves to be quite useful in explaining Waray as well. Another pair of examples (22 and 23, Figures 23–24) is consistent with this understanding.

The essential difference between the N form and the AIA form in Waray is this: the N form is used for when one wants to convey a *maneuver* and *intention* without respect to a *result* of any kind (even if it is heavily implied in certain contexts). The AIA form is used when a speaker wants to convey a specific *result* without respect to *maneuver* or *intention*. In the case of Example 22 (Figure 23), the child tries to spill the water to accomplish some other purpose; thus the focus of the first verb *ginbulog* ‘spills’ is not the result but the intended *maneuver* that makes the man angry. Perhaps more to the point, purpose clauses like that in Example 22 require volitional action (or *intention*) in the main clause, but AIA verbs cannot express this volitional action, so N morphology must be used. In Example 23 (Figure 24), the result of the bottle breaking is the spilling of the water; hence, the speaker uses the

AIA form of the verb *nabulog* ‘spills.’ The English translation ‘managed to’ is an attempt to get this idea across. This phrase suggests difficulty, which is not easily expressed with N morphology, and hence, the AIA form is used.

4. Discussion

This brief analysis has suggested that Dell’s interpretation of Tagalog according to N/AIA morphology works well for Waray. I have attempted to demonstrate this by showing various Waray examples where N and AIA forms are used and, crucially, where N and AIA forms are not semantically possible based on other characteristics in the clause. What the analysis in Section 3 helps demonstrate is that the proposed *g-* prefix is possibly contributing to this N reading in some way.

One crucial area of further research would be to see if the *g-* prefix is producing the N reading on its own or if it is simply the combination of *g-* with other affixation that creates this reading. Most of the examples used throughout this paper have *gin-* for the N morphology. Payne and Oyzon (2020) interpret this affixation as two separate prefixes, the *g-* denoting what they call “deliberate mood,” and the *in-* as “transitive, realis, controlled mood.”³

My suspicion is that this analysis over-complicates the reading of the *g-* morphology. In my view, the *g-* is simply a part of the *gin-* prefix, which denotes neutral, undergoer voice. As we saw in Examples 16 and 17 (Figures 17–18), neutral, actor voice is denoted with the *<um>* prefix. This demonstrates that the *g-* is not necessary to produce the N reading, which at least suggests that the *g-* is not necessarily carrying its own meaning, as Payne and Oyzon (2020) assume. In this way, my analysis of the *g-* is more in line with Rubino (2001) and Diller (1971), who argue that the *g-* is simply a segment of a variety of affixes in Waray (e.g., *gin-* and *mag-*).

On the other hand, in the course of my fieldwork, I did find examples where the *g-* appeared on other affixes, which seem to show the same N/AIA split we have been discussing. An example of such a split is given in Examples 24–26 (Figures 25–27), where I place question marks on the verbal gloss to indicate that this is very preliminary.

After discussing these at length with a native speaker, the *nag-* prefix in Example 24 seems to carry the same N meaning we have been examining. The man does a *maneuver* and has the *intention* of playing the ace card after he has thought about it. This contrasts with Example 25, where the

3 Payne and Oyzon (2020) define “controlled mood” as the following: “Controlled mood normally depicts situations as being under the control of the actor. However, the emphasis in the controlled mood is the *effect* of the situation on the absolute argument (whether the absolute happens to be the actor or not). Often, events in controlled mood are presented as situations the controller always, naturally, effortlessly, or inevitably does...”

corresponding AIA form seems to be used. I also tried changing the sentence in Example 26 to include (well-established) N morphology (in this case, the <*um*> infix, which we saw earlier). This, however, comes across as being semantically ill-formed because the blindfolded man somehow played the ace card on purpose. What is peculiar is that the *nag-* seems to be acting as a neutral, actor voice prefix, similar to <*um*>. I suspect the difference between *nag-* and <*um*> has something to do with tense/aspect.

I only include these sentences to offer some counterexamples and suggest the possibility that the *g-* in *gin-* may be carrying its own “neutral” reading because *nag-* also seems to have the N interpretation. However, as already mentioned, I suspect this is an accident and *nag-* is simply another N affix, the exact nature of which I leave to further research.

5. Conclusion

This brief paper has suggested that the controversial *g-* prefix in Waray can, at least for *gin-*, be interpreted as a part of the N/AIA paradigm posited by Dell (1983). My analysis suggests the conclusion that Rubino (2001) and Diller (1971) are correct in assuming that *g-* is simply a part of other affixation in Waray and not a standalone prefix (as posited by Payne and Oyzon [2020]). Of course, this analysis is far from conclusive; it is my hope, however, that the conversation is at least furthered and other researchers will find this helpful down the road.

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Appendix I: List of Abbreviations

ABL 'Abilitative'
AIA 'Abilitative/Involuntary Action'
AV 'Actor voice'
COMP 'Complementizer'
DAT 'Dative case'
DEF 'Definite'
GEN 'Genitive case'
I 'Intention'
INDEF 'Indefinite'
INSTR 'Instrumental voice'
INTRS 'Intransitive'
INV 'Involuntary'
IRR 'Irrealis'
ITR 'Iterative'
LK 'Linker'
M 'Maneuver'
N 'Neutral'
NEG 'Negation'
NOM 'Nominative case'
PF 'Perfective'
R 'Result'
SG 'Singular'
UV 'Undergoer voice'

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Supplemental File

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