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The Nature of the Visayan Verb

JOSEPH I. STOFFEL

THESE notes were not intended for anyone's benefit except my own. I wrote them as an academic exercise by way of thinking aloud on paper. The reason for writing down my thoughts was to put them in a form in which they could be submitted to several persons well versed in Visayan for either confirmation or correction, as this was a part of the exercise. These Visayanists found in my speculations some things which they considered incorrect and some things which they judged worthy of approval. Several who read the notes urged me not to relegate them to the waste basket where they should normally have gone as they had fulfilled their purpose. It was suggested that the record of my thinking on the subject might possibly be of some help to other beginners who will also have to go through the same thought processes, at least until somebody produces an adequate Visayan Grammar. This explains why the notes have been saved for whatever use they may be to any future student into whose hands they may fall.

Needless to say, I am somewhat ashamed to let others see my pedantic ramblings and the lack of modesty with which I have even invented terminology for my own use, but that will do no harm if you take my warning not to accept my pedantry without question. The dogmatic form in which I phrase tentative theories and conclusions in my own mind would not be used in expressing them to others. I am merely following the usual scholastic method of setting down a state-

ment in apodictic terms but assigning to the statement a philosophical "note" (or *censura*) which gives the statement its evaluation (i.e. as certain or probable or possible or improbable). In my own mind such "notes" are attached to all the statements made in these speculations, however dogmatic the phraseology. And in leaving them for other eyes to see, I would not assign to anything said in these notes a stronger philosophical note than: "worth investigating."

We beginners would have been saved much unnecessary puzzling out for ourselves some of the basic principles of the Visayan language if Bishop Yap had written his *Ang dila natong Bisaya* in English. The student should by all means read it as soon as he can read Visayan well enough to understand it. He will find, as I did, that some of his early analysis of the language was on a wrong track, but he will also be gratified to find that some of his discoveries, which he thought original to him, coincide with the findings of the experts.

Father Trienkens, of the Dutch Missionaries in Opon, is now working on a book which we hope will be the first correctly constructed grammar of Cebuano Visayan, to which all beginners look forward with hopeful anticipation. But meanwhile, if the reader should make some discoveries for himself which I have not made in these speculations or if the reader can show (as he doubtless can) where I have gone wrong in these speculations, I would be grateful if he would pass on to me such nuggets of knowledge so that I also may profit by them.

Two other preliminary remarks should be made. The first is that I am a missionary, not a linguist. I did not learn Visayan in the great linguistic schools of Europe or America. I have learned—or tried to learn—Visayan in the Philippines. I have been studying it for the past nine years, first in Cebu, then in Misamis Oriental, and now in Bukidnon. I offer here my observations of the language as these have come to my notice from daily contact with the people who speak it. And if these observations are not always couched in the terminology adopted by the linguists, it is because I am not familiar with that terminology.

The second is that by Visayan, I mean Cebuano Visayan—the kind that, with minor local variations, is spoken in the islands of Cebu, Bohol, Leyte, in Negros Oriental, and in Mindanao generally, particularly in northern Mindanao.

The anthropologists may find fault with this terminology. When the Editor of this Quarterly first announced his intention to publish these notes of mine, an anthropologist begged him to desist on the ground, among others, that there was no such thing as a Visayan language. "By Visayan, Father Stoffel must mean Cebuan." The word "Cebuan" however, though used by a few American anthropologists and sociologists, is not in current use in the Philippines, though the word Cebuano is common enough. The people themselves refer to their language as Visayan. Or rather, to be exact, they call it *Binisayâ*—and it is as *Binisayâ* that we shall henceforth refer to it.¹

1. THE SUBSTANTIAL NATURE OF THE BINISAYA VERB.

It has been stated that there are no verbs in *Binisayâ*, but only roots which can be constructed into forms which perform the function of any part of speech, including verbs. This is not quite accurate. Leaving aside for the moment the use of roots for making other parts of speech and confining ourselves to nouns and verbs, I think that the truth of this statement can be more exactly expressed by saying that there are no verbs in *Binisayâ* which are merely predicative, as in English; but that Visayan roots can be constructed into two kinds of substantives: *static substantives* (nouns), and *kinetic substantives* (verbs). The latter are truly verbs insofar as they are predicative, but that they are also substantive in nature, and therefore have the nature of both nouns and verbs.

In English, verbs are merely predicative, that is, they attribute the action to the agent and they assign the action to the patient. Only nouns and pronouns are truly substantives—though some other parts of speech may perform the function of nouns, without having the nature of nouns. But in *Binisayâ*,

¹ The circumflex over the final *a* indicates a glottal stop after it which has consonantal value.

verbs by their very nature seem to be *both predicative and substantive*. They are predicative, like English verbs, insofar as they assign the action to a patient. They are substantive, unlike English verbs, insofar as they refer the action to the agent.

Thus, in the active voice the verb does not attribute the action to the subject, but rather performs the substantival role of *naming someone in action*:

Ang nagbuhat.

The one making. (*Quid agens.*)

Looking to the subject, the verb is merely a kinetic substantive. And to form a sentence, this kinetic substantive is identified with another substantive (the subject) by a silent copulative.

Ang Dios MAOY nagbuhat sa kalibutan.

This does not say that God made the world, but rather:

God (IS) the-one-who-made the world.

The emphatic *mao* and the article *y* (*maoy*) could be omitted, but the idea of an equation between two substantives is in the thought, whether the equation is expressed or not.

God (equals) the-one-who-made the world.

Hence the verb *nagbuhat* is, strictly speaking, a predicate substantive in the nominative case.

The verb in Binisayâ can also be in the nominative case as the subject of the sentence:

ANG MGA NAGBUHAT *sa balay miadto na.*

Those building the house have left.

Or it can be in the accusative case as the object of the sentence:

Nagpapahawa siya SA MGA NAGBUHAT sa balay.

He sent away those building the house.

Notice that while performing its role as a substantive in *naming someone in action*, the verb can retain its role as a predicative in *assigning the action* to a patient. Thus, the verb can look

in two directions simultaneously, in one direction as a substantive and in the other direction as a predicative, enjoying the prerogatives of both functions at the same time. Hence, Binisayâ speech is essentially a series of substantives strung together with equation signs and qualified by modifiers.

In the passive voice this is even more clearly apparent, for the agent goes in the genitive case, which is the case of possession. Considering the substantival nature of the verb, the case of possession is the only logical case for the agent.

Guibúhat NAKÒ kiní.

This was made by me.

Thus, in the passive voice, the verb does not assign the action to the subject but rather performs the substantival role of *naming someone in receipt of action*:

Ang buhaton.

Something to be done. (*Quid Patiens*)

And what is said above about the active voice of this kinetic substantive is confirmed in the passive voice by the genitive case of the agent.

Dúnay AKONG buhátón.

I have something to do.

The genitive of agency which modifies a verb is identically the same thing as the genitive of possession which modifies a noun. Since nouns and verbs have a substantival nature in common, it is logical that the owner of both should be in the same case. Indeed, many nouns, specifically as such, are merely a verb-form of the basic root, with perhaps a change of accent.

Basáhon ko ang ákong basahón.

I shall read my book.

And finally, the indirect passive (passive in *an*), that ingenious device of Binisayâ which has no counterpart in English and defies literal translation into English, becomes intelligible only in the light of the verb's dual nature, substantive and predicative. The full force of this fact is brought out when the action is assigned to *two* patients, one a direct recipient and the other an indirect recipient of the action.

Ang pandayán GIBUHATAN ko ug kahón.

Freely, that means: I made a box for the workshop (or it could also mean I made a box in the workshop). This verb *gibuhátan*, illustrating a versatility of which no English verb is capable, and moreover, taking a direct object in the accusative case although the verb is in the passive voice—a feat inconceivable in English—can nevertheless be exactly translated into English according to the Visayan thought pattern if we consider the respective functions of its dual nature. Literally, the above sentence means:

The workshop (IS) *the-place-where-was-received-my-action-of-making the box.*

The verb in its function as a substantive is identified with the subject, which is the indirect patient; while in its function as a predicative it assigns the action to the object, which is the direct patient. At the same time, being substantive, it is modified by a possessor, the agent, in the genitive case.

II. TENSES OF THE VISAYAN VERB.

In English the tense is determined primarily by the time of the action and secondarily by the type of action—viz. whether it is completed or incomplete action. But in Binisayâ the tense is determined primarily by the type of action (completed or incomplete, affirmative or negative) and only secondarily by the time of the action.

A good working norm is—incomplete action—future tense; completed action—past tense; negative action—the so-called “imperative tense.”

1. *Tense of the Binisaya Verb according to the Binisaya Thought-Pattern*

Binisayâ has only three sets of tense-forms, but they are more versatile than the tenses of Latin or European languages. In the active voice these tense-forms are *nag*, *mag*, *pag*. To explain Visayan tenses in terms of Latin grammar, it has been found necessary to break up these forms into many tenses and

thus create tenses which do not objectively exist in Binisayâ (e.g. the "imperative tense" and the present tense).

The chief reason for this necessity is the time factor of the Latin tense. To accomodate the Latin past and present, the Visayan *nag* has been termed "past tense" and "present tense," i.e., equivalent to the Latin *tempus praeteritum* and *tempus praesens*; but *nag* is still only one form and in the Visayan thought-pattern only one tense. Likewise, Binisayâ has a form which corresponds to the Latin imperative mood, namely, the form *mag*, which is identical with the *mag* of the so-called future tense. But this Visayan imperative is clearly not a mood; it belongs to the order of tense. Hence that anomalous foreign invention, the "imperative tense." But in the Visayan thought-pattern, *mag* is *mag*, and it is only one tense regardless of how foreigners wish to term its various applications in order to try to make it fit into the paradigm of the Latin verb.

The Visayan infinitive *pag* does fit the Latin thought-pattern. It is timeless and ontological. It merely names an action and is not concerned with the action's time or state of existence. To call *pag* "infinitive" seems to be appropriate terminology. But the other two Visayan tenses are not determined by the time factor as are the tenses of Latin and it is therefore not appropriate to call them past, present or future. They are determined rather by the action's state of existence.

This tense factor does, it is true, parallel a corresponding tense factor in Latin but even in so doing, there is a difference of focus. In Latin, the action's state of existence is determined from the viewpoint of the action's *termination* as a point of reference. Thus the action is classified as either *completed* or *incomplete*. In Binisayâ, on the other hand, the action's state of existence is determined from the viewpoint, not of the action's termination, but of the action's *inception*. The Visayan conception of a verb's action puts the action into either of two categories: either the action *has already begun* or it *has not yet begun*. Consequently the Visayan verb falls into

SCHEMA I

The following schema shows how Visayan verbs have been made to conform to the European thought-pattern.

English Tense	Type of Action	Time of Action	Bisayan Tense
Progressive Present Indicative	Affirmative Incomplete Current (i.e. in progress at the moment of speaking)	Present	Present
Simple Present Indicative	Affirmative Incomplete Not Current	Present or Not specified	Future
Future Indicative	Affirmative Incomplete	Future	Future
Past Indicative	Affirmative Completed	Past	Past
Present Imperative (Imperious)	Affirmative Imperative (Imperious)	Present Future	Imperative
Future Imperative (Polite)	Affirmative Imperative (Polite)	Future Present	Future
Present Future Prohibition	Prohibition	Present Future	"Pag" form of Imperative with AYAW
Negative Present Future	Negative	Present Future	Imperative with DILI (Primary form in Passive)
Negative Past	Negative	Past	Imperative with WALA (secondary form in Passive)

To form the Bisayan equivalent of the imperfect, future perfect and pluperfect by adding NA and PA, cf. Redemptorist Grammar p. 62. The "imperative tense" is *sui generis*. Its chief use is for negative sentences, regardless of the time of the action. It is the negative particle which indicates the time of the action.

For ordinary commands use future tense. The imperative is somewhat imperious.

SCHEMA II

The following paradigm shows the Binisayâ tenses as they exist objectively in the Visayan thought-pattern. The last block of the paradigm shows the Latin (and English) tenses fitted into the framework of the Binisayâ thought-pattern.

Voice	Mood	Tenses		
		POSITIVE	FUTURITIVE	INFINITIVE
		Action		Verbs
ACTIVE	Progressive	Nag....	Mag..... Pag.....	Pag.....
	Motiv.	Mu.... Mi....	Mu.... (um....) Pag.....	Pag.....
PASSIVE	Direct	Gi.... Gi....	I..... (Pag).....on (a)	
	Indirect	Gi....an	(Pag)..... an (i)	
		Neutral		Verbs
ACTIVE (Middle?)		Na....	Ma..... Pag.....	Pagka....
PASSIVE	Indirect	Na....an	(Pag) Ma.....an	
		Corresponding Latin tenses		
ACTIVE	Indicative (Latin)	Prog. Pres. (Current Action)	Habitual/Simple Persent. Negatives.	Present Infinitive
	Imperative (Latin)		All tenses	Present Participle
PASSIVE (Bis.)	Indicative (Latin)	Past	Future. Negatives.	Gerund
	Imperative (Latin)		All tenses.	

either of two tenses depending on which of these two categories the verb's action fits. The assigning of names to these two tenses is a mere matter of terminology and of small consequence, but I suggest that it might be appropriate to call them the "positive tense" and the "futuritive tense." Thus *nagbuhat* is "positive," *magbuhat* is futuritive, and *pagbuhat* is infinitive.

There are, then, only three forms in the Visayan tongue (positive, futuritive and infinitive) to be found from an analysis of the language as it exists in the Visayan thought-pattern. The common classification of the verb-forms into present, past, future tense and into imperative and infinitive "tenses"

is not the result of analyzing the Visayan verb as it exists in the Visayan thought-pattern but the result of trying to fit the Binisayâ language into the procrustean bed of Latin grammar. The resulting paradigm is not a *schema* of Visayan tenses but a *schema* of Latin tenses with Visayan verb forms substituted for the Latin forms and arranged in a framework of tenses which do not exist in the Visayan language. This paradigm (see Schema I) is unrealistic and does violence to the genius of the language.

According to the Binisayâ thought-pattern, there are only two tenses: the positive and the futuristic, and likewise the infinitive. (See Schema II).

Positive Tense

All verbs whose action *has already begun* belong to this tense. They are classified as actions *posited*, regardless of whether they have also been completed (past) or are still in the process of being completed (current present). This Visayan tense is used to translate both the English past tense and the English progressive present tense. Thus:

Nagbuhat ako.

I am making (or I made).

This classification seems at first glance to ignore the time-factor and therefore would seem to result in ambiguity, but the Visayan usage of the positive tense has a way of obviating this ambiguity by certain preferences in the use of voice. Hence it might be well to insert here an observation on the use of voice in satisfying the demands of the time-factor.

2. Voice and the Time-factor of Tenses

While both active and passive voice of the positive tense could be used grammatically both for verbs whose action is past and for verbs whose action is in progress at the moment of speaking, Visayan generally prefers to use the active voice for verbs whose action has already begun and is still in progress at the moment of speaking. Thus, unless there is in the context something to indicate otherwise,

Nagbuhat ako

will normally be understood to mean,

"I am making (or doing) at this very moment";
while, again aside from anything in the context to indicate otherwise,

Gibuhat ko

will invariably be understood to mean,

"I did or I made—at sometime in the past."

A corresponding preference can be observed in the use of the futuritive tense. While both active and passive voice of the futuritive tense could be used grammatically both for verbs whose action is future and for verbs whose action is habitually present, Visayan generally prefers to use the active voice for verbs whose action is considered as not yet begun but is habitually present at the moment of speaking. Thus, unless there is in the context something to indicate otherwise,

Magbúhat ako

will normally be understood to mean

"It is my practice, or habit, to make (or do)," while, again aside from anything in the context to indicate otherwise,

Buháton ko

will invariably be understood to mean,

"I will make (or do)—at sometime in the future."

This is only a matter of preference and is not so rigid as to constitute a rule of grammar, but the preference is so strong that unless some grammatical factor interferes, the Visayan mind is drawn like a magnet to the passive voice when it thinks of actions present. And since human speech deals by far the more frequently with things past and future it can readily be seen why the greater part of Visayan speech is in the passive voice.

But reverting again to the positive tense, a grammatical factor interferes with this preference for the passive when dealing with verbs of motion or other verbs in the motive mode

(i.e. verbs using the *mu* system of affixes) because there is no passive voice proper to this mode. The ancient prefix for the positive tense of this mode was *mi* (or *ming*). *Ming* is now quite obsolete but *mi* is still retained for verbs of this tense belonging to past time, while common usage has now come to adopt *mu* (perhaps borrowed from the futuritive tense?) for verbs of this tense belonging to present time.

Miádto (or *Mingadto*) *siyá*. He went.

Walâ siyá muádto. He did not go.

4. *Futuritive Tense*

All verbs whose action *has not yet begun* belong to this tense. They are classified as actions not *posited*, regardless of whether they will be done at some future time or have not yet begun because they never will begin. Hence I call this the "futuritive tense" because it belongs to the realm of things future but contains not only the pure futures but also the pure futuribles. Thus:

Walâ pa akó magbúhat

means I have not yet made (or done). I may never come to do it. Or I may be about to do it. All that I state however is that I have not yet done the action.

The logic of classifying the *habitual present* in the category of *actions not yet begun* might be questioned. The habitual present belongs to two realms, things past as well as things future. But the Visayan mind looks at the habitual present only under its future aspect. And we can see the sharp logic of this when we remember that the habitual present loses its *habitual* nature if we do not look at it under its future aspect. If the habitual present is not classified under its future aspect it is not habitual present, but belongs to the past. In which case it would go in the category of actions already posited and the verb would go in the positive tense—and there would be no distinction between the current present and the habitual present. The Visayan tongue, in making this distinction, seems not only to be logical but also more precise than English whose grammar does not have two distinct tenses for these two kinds of action in present time.