

The Tagalog Copula

Tagalog is famous (Kroeger 1998, Pustet 2003) for lacking a copula; predicates need not contain a verb, as the examples in (1) show. I will argue that Tagalog does have a copula, the verb *maging*, as in (2-3) (cf. Constantino 1971). As Manuelli (2006) points out, there are at least two challenges for the idea that *maging* is a copula. One is that *maging* often means ‘become’, as in (4). Another is that *maging* is typically absent in copular sentences, as in (1).

Why can *maging* mean ‘become’?

Although *maging* can mean ‘become’, in (2-3) it clearly means ‘be’; the sentences in (2), for example, can describe someone who currently is a professor/beautiful, which would make ‘become’ infelicitous. In being able to mean either ‘be’ or ‘become’, *maging* patterns with a number of Tagalog verbs which can have either a stative or an inchoative reading. Many such verbs begin with *ma-*: *magutom* ‘be hungry, become hungry’, *matakot* ‘be afraid, become afraid’.

Why doesn’t *maging* appear in most copular sentences?

The contrast in (1-3), in which a copula appears in infinitives but not in finite clauses, has parallels in Russian (5) and Hebrew (6), which also have disappearing copulas. One apparent difference between Tagalog and Russian/Hebrew has to do with statements about the past, which have overt copulas in Russian and Hebrew but a null one in Tagalog: (7). We can trace this difference to another difference: Tagalog has verbal morphology for aspect, not for tense. Consequently, Tagalog uses the same verb form (namely, the imperfective aspect form) to describe a state, whether that state holds in the present or in the past: (8). The facts in (1) vs. (7c) are similar: the same form of the copula (that is, the null form) is used in tensed clauses describing states holding in the past or the present. We can capture the facts in Russian, Hebrew, and Tagalog, then, by saying that these are all languages in which present imperfective forms of the copula are null. Note that *maging* only drops when used as a copula; when it means ‘become’, its imperfective form is overt (9).

Copulas as support

The Tagalog data support a popular approach to the distribution of copulas (Matushansky 2000, Harves 2002, den Dikken 2006): the copula is a form of morphological support. In general, copulas appear, on this view, to support functional structure which typically attaches to verbs but is morphologically unable to attach to non-verbs. As Matushansky (2000) argues for Russian, languages in which copulas may fail to appear under default interpretations for tense and aspect are ones in which these default interpretations are consistent with the absence of the functional heads T and Asp; when these heads are absent, they no longer need support from a copula, and hence the copula does not appear. Tagalog bolsters the case for this general approach to copula-drop, by showing that copulas may drop not merely for default Tense (as in Hebrew and Russian), but for default Aspect (that is, imperfective). Tagalog *maging* also appears to support the feature INCHOATIVE (or perhaps a functional head bearing that feature); hence, *maging* appears when the meaning ‘become’ is intended, even when Aspect needs no support (9).

The lightness of *maging*

As we might expect from a functional item of this kind, *maging* is unlike ordinary verbs in many respects. All other *ma-* verbs have more than one syllable in their roots; perhaps relatedly, *maging* is unable to host second-position clitics (10). *Maging*’s complement may be a wh-phrase, but cannot move (11); in this regard, *maging* is unlike other verbs (12) but resembles the locative predicate marker *na* (13). All of these facts suggest that *maging* is not an ordinary verb, but a functional element higher than the main predicate.

- (1) a. Propesor ang babae. b. Maganda ang babae.
 professor ANG woman beautiful ANG woman
 ‘The woman is a professor’ ‘The woman is beautiful’
 c. Para sa babae ang sulat.
 for DAT woman ANG letter
 ‘The letter is for the woman’
- (2) a. Ayaw na niya-ng **maging** propesor.
 doesn’t.want now 3SG-LI be professor
 ‘She doesn’t want to be a professor any more’
 b. Ayaw na niya-ng **maging** maganda.
 doesn’t.want now 3SG-LI be beautiful
 ‘She doesn’t want to be beautiful any more’
- (3) a. Mahirap **maging** propesor. b. Mahirap **maging** maganda.
 difficult be professor difficult be beautiful
 ‘It’s hard being a professor’ ‘It’s hard being beautiful’
- (4) **Naging** Pangulo si Marcos noong 1965.
 became President ANG Marcos in.PAST 1965
 ‘Marcos became President in 1965’
- (5) Margarita stud’entka [Russian] (6) Pnina tinoket [Hebrew]
 Margarita student Pnina baby
 ‘Margarita is a student’ ‘Pnina is a baby’
- (7) a. Margarita **byla** stud’entka [Russian]
 M. was student
 b. Pnina **hayta** tinoket [Hebrew]
 P. was baby
 c. Propesor ang babae (noon) [Tagalog]
 professor ANG woman then.PAST
 ‘The woman **was** a professor (then)’
- (8) a. Natutulog na siya (ngayon) b. Natutulog na siya (noon)
 IMPRF-sleep now 3SG now IMPRF-sleep now 3SG then.PAST
 ‘He’s sleeping (now)’ ‘He was sleeping (then)’
- (9) Kung ang Pangulo ay hindi na nakakapaglingkod, sino ang **nagiging** Pangulo?
 if ANG presidentINV not now can.serve who ANG IMPF-become president
 ‘If the president can no longer serve, who **becomes** president?’
- (10) Naging (*siya) Pangulo (siya)
 PRF-become 3SG president 3SG
 ‘She became president’
- (11) a. Naging **ano** ang nanay mo? b. ***Ano** ang naging ng nanay mo?
 PRF-become what ANG mother your what ANG PRF-become NG mother your
 ‘What did your mother become?’
- (12) a. *Binili **ano** ng nanay mo? b. **Ano** ang binili ng nanay mo?
 PRF-buy what NG mother your what ANG PRF-buy NG mother your
 ‘What did your mother buy?’
- (13) a. Nasa **aling kotse** ang nanay mo? b. ***Aling kotse** ang nasa ang nanay mo?
 be-DAT which car ANG mother your which car ANG be-D ANG mom your
 ‘Which car is your mother in?’