Another Look at Tagalog Subjects

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1. Introduction

There has been a fair amount of controversy over the right way of thinking about alternations like that shown in 1 (Tagalog), involving a phenomenon I will refer to as "topicalization"[1]:

1. a. Bumili ang lalaki ng bigas
   AT-bought T man G rice
   'The man bought rice'
   b. Binili ng lalaki ang bigas
   GT-bought A man T rice
   'A man bought the rice'

There are two major camps on this question that I am familiar with, both of which represent the difference between 1.a and 1.b as one involving voice. For those who regard Tagalog as a Nominative-Accusative language (e.g., Guilfoyle, Hung, and Travis 1992, Richards 199Ø, 1993), 1.a is in the active voice, while 1.b represents something like the passive. This account takes ***ang*** to be a marker of

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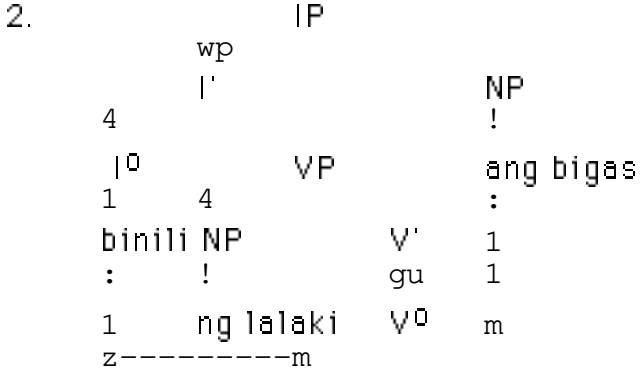
[1] Throughout this paper I will be using Schachter's (1976) terminology for describing the Tagalog topicalization system; thus, verbs will be marked AT for Actor-Topic, GT for Goal-Topic, DT for Direction-Topic, etc.; similarly, T stands for Topic, A for Actor (roughly, the logical subject), G for Goal (roughly, the direct object), and so forth. In 1.a, for example, the verb is in the Actor-Topic form, because the actor ***lalaki*** 'man' has been topicalized, while in 1.b the verb bears Goal-Topic morphology that signals the topicalization of the goal ***bigas*** 'rice'. I will also follow Schachter in using Li for the Tagalog "linker", about which I will have nothing to say here.

nominative case. Others (including Payne 1982, De Guzman 1988, Gerdts 1988, and Maclachlan and Nakamura 1994) claim that Tagalog is an Ergative-Absolutive language; on this view, 1.b is the active voice, while 1.a is an antipassive. For those pursuing this view, ***ang*** is a marker of absolutive case. I will try to argue here that both of these approaches are mistaken and that Tagalog topicalization has nothing to do with case, thus agreeing in spirit with Shibatani (1988).

Guilfoyle, Hung, and Travis (1992), and also Richards (199Ø, 1993), propose a way of looking at Tagalog topicalization which has been fairly influential, according to which the topic (that is, ***lalaki*** 'man' in 1.a, and ***bigas*** 'rice' in 1.b) is in an external subject position, while the actor (***lalaki*** in both 1.a and 1.b) is base-generated in an internal subject position. This is shown in 2, a structure for 1.b:

2.



According to this view, what makes Tagalog unique is its ability to fill both the internal and the external subject position simultaneously with different nominals; the subject can be base-generated in Spec VP, as subjects universally are, and nominals can be moved to Spec IP to get case without the base-generated subject needing to be made into an adjunct, as in English. This claim is

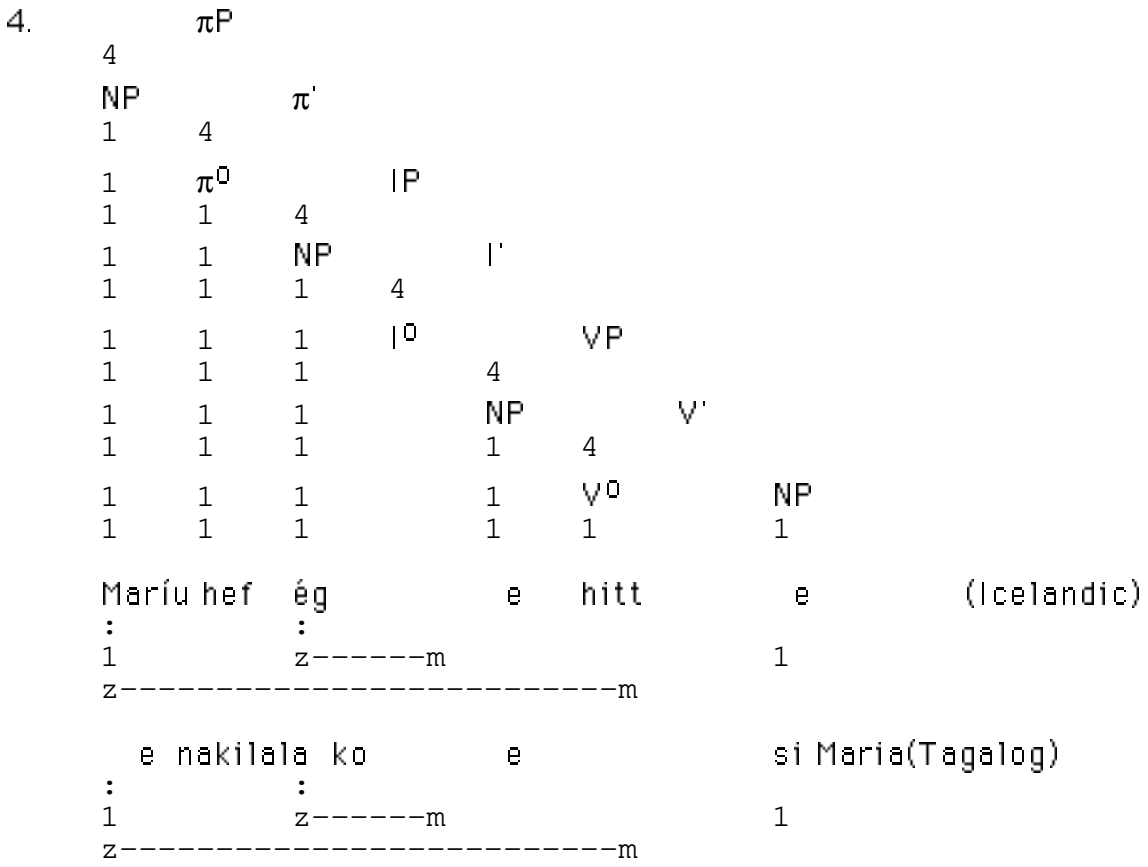
independent of the debate just mentioned over whether Tagalog is an accusative or an ergative language; GHT and Richards assume the former, but Maclachlan and Nakamura (1994) assume GHT's structure while arguing persuasively that Tagalog is in fact an ergative language.

Since this kind of structure was first proposed, more complex versions of the Internal Subject Hypothesis have been developed, leaving us with the question of which external subject position the topic actually occupies. In this paper I will try to show that the assumption that the topic occupies the position in which subjects in other languages receive case has led to unnecessary complications in our theories about Tagalog.

A variety of recent papers (Branigan 1992, Jonas 1992, Harley to appear) have argued for the presence of an A'-specifier above the position in which the subject typically receives case, which is typically occupied by the subject in many languages; I will refer to this functional projection as πP, which is Branigan's (1992) name for it. Branigan (1992), Jonas (1992), and Harley (to appear) all take this position to be that occupied by the element preceding the verb in V2 clauses. I will try to argue here that the Tagalog topic also occupies Spec πP; that is, that the alternation in 1 is more similar to that in 3 than it is to more familiar alternations involving voice (Icelandic, from Rögnvaldsson and Thráinsson 199Ø, 3):

3. a. Ég hef aldrei hitt Maríu
      I have never met Maria
   b. Maríu hef ég aldrei hitt
      Maria have I never met

Thus, I will be assuming that Tagalog and Icelandic share the structure in 4[2]:



According to this story, the only relevant syntactic difference between Icelandic and Tagalog is that movement to Spec πP in Icelandic is overt, while the Tagalog equivalent involves movement at LF. Of course, there are some obvious morphological differences between the Icelandic and Tagalog cases, but syntactically they are quite similar, as we will see.

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[2] In fact, I am inclined to believe in a more articulated version of INFL than is depicted here, consisting of separate projections for Tense, Agreement, and so forth, but this is irrelevant to our concerns.

2. Tagalog=Icelandic

To begin with, Tagalog topicalization behaves like A'-movement for Binding Theory, which is an embarassment for theories in which topicalization is case-driven:

5. a. Nagmamahal si Juan sa kanyang sarili
AT-loves T Juan Loc his self
'Juan loves himself'

b. Minamahal ni Juan ang kanyang sarili
GT-loves A Juan T his self
'Juan loves himself'

Topicalization of an anaphor--by hypothesis, movement of the anaphor to a position c-commanding its binder--violates neither Condition C nor Condition A. This is not typical of A-movement:

6. *I believe himself to seem to John to be smart

On the other hand, movement to the preverbal position in a language like Icelandic does behave this way (Steingrímur Karason, p.c.):

7. a. Jón elskar sjálfan sig
John loves himself

b. Sjálfan sig elskar Jón
himself loves John

Syntactically, then, Tagalog topicalization looks more like movement to the preverbal slot than it does like case-driven movement.

Another parallel between Tagalog and Icelandic topicalization has to do with the behavior of extraction. Adherents of the πP-based explanation of V2 phenomena will have to provide an explanation for the facts in 8 and 9 (Icelandic, 8 adapted from Rögnvaldsson and

Thráinsson 199Ø, 14; 9 from Eirikur Rögnvaldsson and Höskuldur Thráinsson, p.c.):

8. a. [$_{CP}$ Hvern [$_{\pi P}$ hefur [$_{IP}$ María kysst]]]?
whom has Mary kissed

b.*[$_{CP}$ Hvern [$_{\pi P}$ María hefur [$_{IP}$ kysst]]]?
whom Maria has kissed

9. a. [$_{CP}$ [$_{\pi P}$ Steingrímur hefur [$_{IP}$ gefið Maríu bókina]]]
Steingrimur has given Mary the-book

b. [$_{CP}$ [$_{\pi P}$ Bókina hefur [$_{IP}$ Steingrímur gefið Maríu]]]
the-book has Steingrimur given Mary

c. [$_{CP}$ Hverjum [$_{\pi P}$ hefur [$_{IP}$ Steingrímur gefið bókina]]]?
whom has Steingrimur given the-book

d. *[$_{CP}$ Hverjum [$_{\pi P}$ bókina hefur [$_{IP}$ Steingrímur gefið]]]?
whom the-book has Steingrimur given

In main clauses, extraction apparently cannot take place if Spec πP is occupied by another nominal. One way of describing this would be to say that extraction must take place via Spec πP; that is, to say that only elements in Spec πP can be extracted. The famous Tagalog ban on extraction of non-topics, of course, look very similar:

1Ø. a. [$_{CP}$ Sino ang [$_{\pi P}$ hinalikan [$_{IP}$ ni Maria]]]?
who DT-kissed A Mary
'Who did Mary kiss?'

b. *[$_{CP}$ Sino ang [$_{\pi P}$ e humalik [$_{IP}$ si Maria]]]?
:
z----------m
who AT-kissed T Mary
'Who did Mary kiss?'

On this story, 10.a is parallel to 8.a, and 10.b to 8.b; if the subject is made into the topic, extraction cannot take place, while if the extracted object is made the topic the structure is well-formed. Nakamura's (1993) Economy-based account, according to which 8.a and 10.a are well-formed because extraction takes place in two short moves rather than one long move, can account for both these sets of facts without difficulty.

Icelandic, like many V2 languages, has a process of "topic-drop" (Sigurðsson 1993, 254-255):

11. a. (Ég) þekki það ekki
(I) recognize that not
b. (það) þekki ég ekki
that recognize I not
'I don't recognize that'
c. Núna þekki *(ég) *(það) ekki
now recognize I that not
'Now I don't recognize that'

Tagalog seems to behave similarly. For example, 12.a, but not 12.b, is an appropriate response to "Why is Juan sick?" (Marlon Abayan, p.c.):

12. a. Baka kumain (siya) ng tambakol
maybe AT-ate T-he G mackerel
'Maybe he ate mackerel'
b. Baka kinain *(niya) ang tambakol
maybe GT-ate A-he T mackerel
'Maybe he ate the mackerel'

Finally, it is interesting to note that topicalization in Tagalog and Icelandic may have roughly similar semantic effects. Schachter (1976) notes that the term "topic" is actually a misnomer in Tagalog, since the Tagalog topic need not be especially discourse-prominent. For example, if asked the question "Where's John?", where any reasonable definition of discourse-prominence should make John the topic of conversation, a Tagalog speaker might respond with 13, where ***pinggan*** 'dishes' is the topic:

13. Hinuhugasan niya ang mga pinggan
    DT-washes A-he T pl. dish
    'He's washing the dishes'

Interestingly, the Icelandic equivalent of 13 is also well-formed as an answer to that question, also with 'dishes' as the topic (Steingrímur Karason, p.c.):

14. Diskana þvær hann
    dishes-the washes he
    'He's washing the dishes'

Similarly, it has often been noted that Tagalog topics must be specific, or definite, or "old information", or something of that kind. In fact, this has been one of the arguments offered against equating the Tagalog topic with subjects in other languages, on the grounds that such semantic restrictions seldom apply to subjects (Bowen 1965, Schachter and Otanes 1972). Interestingly, the Icelandic topic appears to also be associated with a definite reading.

Topicalization of indefinites is considerably more awkward than topicalization of definites (Höskuldur Thráinsson, p.c.):

15. a. Jón keypti bókina
Jon bought the-book
b. Jón keypti bók
Jon bought a-book
c. Bókina keypti Jón
the-book bought Jon
d. ??Bók keypti Jón
a-book bought Jon

Thus, in Icelandic, as in Tagalog, Spec πP appears to be associated with definiteness in some way.

If we take these syntactic and semantic parallels between Tagalog and Icelandic topicalization seriously, we are inclined toward an analysis that posits the same structure for both; that is, we are inclined to assume that topicalization in Tagalog, as in Icelandic, involves movement to an A′ specifier c-commanding the position in which the subject gets case. In the next section we will see how this assumption simplifies our understanding of the structure of Tagalog.

3. Tagalog case

The preceding section reviewed a number of phenomena which are unexpected under a theory in which Tagalog topicalization involves movement to the position in which the subject gets case in English. By taking advantage of recent refinements of the Internal Subject Hypothesis, according to which the subject is associated with several external subject positions with different properties, we can account for these phenomena straightforwardly. Furthermore, by not assigning the topic either nominative or

absolutive case, we avoid problems involving case-assignment to the other nominals in the sentence; this can now take place in the usual way.

According to the accusative view of Tagalog, the topic is in the nominative case, and direct objects which are not topics bear accusative case. Such a view must invent some ad hoc mechanism for assigning case to non-topic Actors. Actors are clearly arguments and not adjuncts; they can bind reflexives, as shown in 16.a, and can function as controlled PRO, as in 16.b:

16. a. Ibinigay ni Juan ang premyo sa kanyang sarili
GT-gave A Juan T prize D his self
'Juan gave the prize to himself'

b. Binalak ni Juang kainin ang tambakol
GT-planned A Juan-Li GT-eat T mackerel
'Juan planned to eat the mackerel'

As Maclachlan and Nakamura (1994) point out, the actor's case-marking is identical to that on possessors of nominals, an otherwise unattested pattern in nominative-accusative languages:

17. a. lapis ko
pencil A-I
'my pencil'

b. Binili ko ang lapis
GT-bought A-I T pencil
'I bought the pencil'

On the account developed here, on the other hand, no difficulties arise, since topicalization does not involve movement to a case position. The subject can receive case in the usual way. If

we decide to view Tagalog as an accusative language, the actor bears nominative case, and Tagalog possessors look very much like their Hungarian counterparts (19 is Hungarian, from Abney 1987, 44 and 46):

18. a. lapis ko
pencil A-I
b. aking lapis
L-I pencil
'my pencil'

19. a. a te vendeg -e -d
the you-NOM guest POSSESSED 2s
'your guest'
b. Peter-nek a kalapja
Peter DAT the hat
'Peter's hat'

Tagalog and Hungarian, on this account, have both dative and nominative possessors. Note that the Hungarian dative possessor precedes the article, while the nominative possessor follows the article, while in Tagalog the dative and nominative possessors precede and follow the noun head. We might analyze this as indicating that Tagalog N^0 raises higher in the DP than Hungarian N^0 does (cf. Longobardi 1994); this is the only syntactic difference, on this story, between Hungarian and Tagalog with regard to the data shown here.

According to the ergative view of Tagalog structure, sentences like 2Ø must be antipassives, since the subject is in the

absolutive case; that is, the object must not receive case from the verb:

2Ø. Kumain ang lalaki ng tambakol

AT-ate T man G mackerel

In the story developed here, on the other hand, the marker ***ang*** has nothing to do with the case assigned to ***lalaki***; 2Ø may very well be an active sentence. As it happens, Kroeger 1993 has argued convincingly against the view that 2Ø is an antipassive, since the direct object behaves syntactically like an argument of the verb. Kroeger outlines several tests for argumenthood, only one of which I will describe here. PRO in adjunct clauses cannot be controlled by non-arguments in Tagalog, as 21 shows (adapted from Kroeger 1993, 43):

21. Bumisita si Juan$_i$ sa hari$_j$ [nang nagiisa PRO$_{i/*j}$]

AT-visited T Juan L king Adv AT-one

'Juan visited the king alone'

21 can only be understood as meaning that Juan was alone, not that the king was alone. 22.a and 22.b, by contrast, are both ambiguous (adapted from Kroeger 1993, 47):

22. a. Hinuli ng polis$_i$ ang magnanakaw$_j$ [nang pumapasok PRO$_{i/j}$
GT-caught A police T thief Adv AT-enter
sa bangko]
L bank
'(The) police caught the thief entering the bank'
b. Nanghuli ng magnanakaw$_i$ ang polis$_j$ [nang pumapasok PRO$_{i/j}$
AT-caught G thief T police Adv AT-enter
sa bangko]
L bank
'The police caught a thief entering the bank'

Note that in 22.b PRO can be controlled by the direct object even when the verb is in the actor-topic form; that is, even in the putative antipassive. This seems to suggest that non-topic direct objects are in fact arguments of the verb, contrary to the ergative view. Accounts of Tagalog that describe it as ergative must therefore invent a new mechanism to license the direct object in "antipassives", just as the nominative-accusative account must invent a new way for non-topic subjects to acquire case. The theory developed here, on the other hand, does not need to complicate existing accounts of case, since topicalization is not taken to be case-driven movement.

Maclachlan and Nakamura 1994 argue for a mechanism of assigning inherent case to non-topic direct objects, based on the fact that such direct objects are always non-specific when the verb is in the actor-topic form (Maclachlan and Nakamura 1994, 53):

23. Bumili ng isda ang lalaki

AT-bought G fish T man

'The man bought (*the) fish'

Assignment of inherent case to the direct object forces the direct object to remain ***in situ***, since it has no motivation to raise for case. Following Diesing 1992, this is taken to result in a non-specific reading. The specificity effect is absent when nominals other than the actor and the patient are topicalized, with verbs in the recent-past form, and in gerundive constructions (from Maclachlan and Nakamura 1994, 53 and 57-58):

24. a. Ibinili ng lalaki ng isda ang bata

BT-bought A man G fish T child

'A/the man bought the child (the) fish'

b. Kabibili lang ng lalaki ng isda

Recent Past-bought just A man G fish

'A/The man just bought (the) fish'

c. pagtugtog niya ng piyesa

Gerund-play A-he G piece

'His playing the piece'

Maclachlan and Nakamura claim that this is a result of the morphology found on the verb in these cases, which renders it able to assign structural case. However, as Adams and Manaster-Ramer (1988) and Voskuil (1993) both point out, the specificity effect is also neutralized when the verb is forced to be in the actor-topic form for some independent reason. In 25.a, adding ***ito*** 'this' to the direct object leads to semantic anomaly, presumably because of the specificity effect noted above. This effect vanishes in 25.b, where

the verb must be in the actor-topic form to permit formation of a free relative, since the relative operator must be topicalized to be extracted (adapted from Voskuil 1993, 28):

25. a. ??Nagbuhos siya ng tubig na ito sa ulo ng bata
AT-poured T-he G water Li this L head Gen boy
'He poured this water on the boy's head'

b. Siya ang nagbuhos ng tubig na ito sa ulo ng bata
T-he T AT-poured G water Li this L head Gen boy
'He is the one who poured water on this boy's head'

Here the claim that the verb has been rendered capable of assigning structural case seems more suspect.

The well-formedness of 25.b might incline us to pursue a rather different account that relies crucially on the fact that the goal-topic form of the verb is the most frequently used form (cf. Cooreman, Fox, and Givón 1988 for discussion). Given that goal-topicalization is the unmarked case, we might assume that failure to employ it requires some kind of justification. Cases where the goal cannot possibly be topicalized for structural reasons, as in 25.b, provide such justification, as does the use of verb forms like those in 24.b-c, which have no goal-topic counterparts, and the use of topic-markers like that in 24.a, which are quite rare (and thus presumably require special semantic circumstances which justify failure to use the unmarked topic-form). In cases where none of these reasons are available, then, the assumption is that failure to use the goal-topic form of the verb signals a desire to avoid the semantic consequences of goal-topicalization; that is, that the goal is to be taken as non-specific.

This account also provides us with a story about a similar specificity effect in Icelandic. Icelandic differs from Tagalog in that the most commonly topicalized NP is the subject. As Cardinaletti and Roberts (1991) note, insertion of an expletive *það* in the pre-verbal slot, which leads to failure to topicalize anything, forces an indefinite interpretation of the subject (Cardinaletti and Roberts 1991, 50 and 52):

26. a. Ég harma að það skuli enginn hafa lesið þessa bók
I regret that it should nobody have read this book
'I regret that nobody should have read this book'

b. *Ég harma að það skuli Maria hafa lesið þessa bók
I regret that it should Maria have read this book
'I regret that Mary should have read this book'

Note, however, that no specificity effect is observed with nominals other than the subject; in 26.a, for example, the direct object is certainly specific. Also, topicalization of a non-subject does not force the subject to be interpreted as indefinite (Zaenen, Maling, and Thráinsson 1990, 103):

27. Jón telur að Harald hafi María kysst í gær
John believes that Harald-ACC has Mary-NOM kissed yesterday
'John believes that Harald, Mary kissed yesterday'

The Icelandic specificity effect and the Tagalog specificity effect seem rather similar. In both cases, failure to employ the unmarked type of topicalization results in a non-specific reading for the most commonly topicalized nominal (the subject, in Icelandic, and the object, in Tagalog), unless some independent factor can be seen as forcing the use of a marked topicalization structure.

Finally, Tagalog topicalization has effects on weak crossover that are unexpected if Tagalog is an ergative language:

28. a. *Nagmamahal ang kanyang$_i$ ama ng bawat anak$_i$
AT-loves T his father G every child
'His father loves every child'

b. ?Minamahal ng kanyang$_i$ ama ang bawat anak$_i$
GT-loves A his father T every child
'His father loves every child'

This is not what we expect if ***anak*** in 28.b is absolutive and ***ama*** is ergative (Basque and Nisgha, from Bobaljik 1993, 60):

29. a. * Nor maite du bere amak?
who-ABS love AUX.3sA/3sE his mother-ERG
'Who$_i$ does his$_i$ mother love?'

b. *næ-gat ɬ ti-sip'an-s nɔx^w-t
who-one ND FOC-love-DM mother-3s
'Who$_i$ does his$_i$ mother love?'

As we can see, making a quantificational element absolutive does not allow it to bind a variable in an ergative nominal. Icelandic topicalization, however, does behave like Tagalog topicalization (Höskuldur Thráinsson and Eirikur Rögnvaldsson, p.c.):

30. a. *Foreldrar hans kenna sérhverjum strák að keyra
parents his teach every boy to drive
'His$_i$ parents teach every boy$_i$ how to drive'

b. ?Sérhverjum strák kenna foreldrar hans að keyra
every boy teach parents his to drive
'Every boy$_i$, his$_i$ parents teach how to drive'

4. Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper I noted that a controversy exists on the question of whether Tagalog is a nominative-accusative or ergative-absolutive language. This controversy has been predicated on the assumption that topicalization is case-driven movement; that is, that markers like ***ang*** and ***si*** mark nominals as bearing either nominative or absolutive case. I have tried to show here that this view is incorrect, and that movement to the topic position in Tagalog is more like movement to the pre-verbal slot in languages like Icelandic than it is like passive in English. If this conclusion is right, the question of Tagalog's case system will have to be completely re-thought.

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