

Notes on the Grammar of Bisaya in Santa Josefa

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54476/apjaet/18970>

Abstract

This study investigates the grammatical structure of Bisaya as spoken in Santa Josefa, a linguistic variety that serves as a marker of community identity and reflects the speakers' deep appreciation for their language. Anchored in a pedagogic grammar framework and employing a qualitative descriptive research design, the study utilized discourse analysis of data drawn from Pear Film narratives, procedural (“how-to”) interviews, and a 200-word translation task. These data were supplemented by acoustic vowel analysis using PRAAT to capture phonetic and phonological features. The findings reveal salient morphological, phonological, morphosyntactic, and syntactic characteristics of the Bisaya variety in Santa Josefa. Its phonemic inventory comprises sixteen consonants and three vowels, with notable phonological features including minimal pairs, diphthongs, and distinct phonotactic patterns. The language demonstrates productive morphological processes and exhibits an ergative–absolutive alignment alongside a predominantly verb-initial sentence structure. The study concludes that the Bisaya spoken in Santa Josefa possesses a systematic and culturally grounded grammatical system that reinforces linguistic identity. The grammar notes generated from this research contribute to the documentation of this local variety and offer a valuable resource for the development of instructional materials in Mother Tongue-Based education, thereby supporting language preservation and pedagogical effectiveness.

Keywords: Grammar Notes, Bisaya, Santa Josefa, Philippines

Introduction

Languages are not only systems of communication but also repositories of cultural identity, shaping how communities understand themselves and the world around them. The Philippines is a linguistically diverse country, home to 186 languages, 184 of which are still actively spoken (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2020). Among these, Cebuano Visayan stands out as one of the major languages, spoken by millions across various regions, including the Visayas and Mindanao (Eslit, 2023; Dita, 2010; Pesirla, 2019). Its classification within the Austronesian Malayo-Polynesian language family places it in a rich historical and

cultural context, shared with other Philippine languages (Bell, 1976; Eslit, 2023; Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2020; Endrigo, 2010; Pesirla, 2019).

Despite its widespread use, the documentation and comprehensive study of Cebuano Visayan, particularly its grammatical structures, remain limited. This research focuses on the grammar of Bisaya as spoken in Santa Josefa, Agusan del Sur, a specific variant within the Cebuano Visayan language. The need for this study arises from the recognition that detailed linguistic documentation is crucial for the preservation and promotion of languages, especially those that are under-documented or at risk of decline (Gallego, 2020).

Cebuano Visayan is a phonetic language with a straightforward phoneme-grapheme correspondence, making it unique among Philippine languages (Cebuano Phonetics and Orthography, 2020; Pesirla, 2019). Its phonetic system includes three vowels and fifteen consonants, with specific rules for the representation of sounds such as the glottal stop (Pesirla, 2019; Endrigo, 2010). The language's morphology is complex, characterized by the extensive use of affixes to create new words and meanings, reflecting its morphosyntactic nature (Bunye & Yap, 1971; Genon-Sieras, 2020). In terms of syntax, Cebuano Visayan typically follows a predicate-construct structure, often starting with the verb followed by noun phrases (Bell, 1976; Pesirla, 2019). This verb-initial structure is a distinctive feature, influencing how sentences are constructed and understood. The language also employs various affixes to indicate tense, aspect, and voice, further adding to its grammatical richness (Bell, 1976; Bunye & Yap, 1971).

Santa Josefa, Agusan del Sur, provides a unique linguistic landscape for this study. The local variant of Bisaya spoken here may exhibit distinct features that differ from standard Cebuano Visayan. Documenting these differences is essential for a more nuanced understanding of the language's diversity and for the development of educational and preservation strategies. This research aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on Cebuano Visayan by providing detailed grammar notes specific to this region. This study aligns with the broader goals of language documentation and preservation, as highlighted by various linguists and researchers (Himmelman, 2008; Tanangkingsing, 2009). By focusing on the grammatical aspects of Bisaya in Santa Josefa, this research not only aids in preserving a vital part of the region's cultural heritage but also supports the ongoing efforts to promote linguistic diversity in the Philippines. The grammar notes of Bisaya in Santa Josefa, Agusan del Sur, serve as a crucial resource for linguists, educators, and language enthusiasts. This research provides a comprehensive examination of the phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics of the local Bisaya variant, contributing to its documentation and preservation for future generations.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to:

1. Determine the phonetic and phonological inventory of sounds in the Bisaya language as spoken in Santa Josefa;
2. Identify the general word formation processes in the Bisaya language as spoken in Santa Josefa; and
3. Analyze the syntax-semantic properties present in the selected language or corpus of Santa Josefa Bisaya.

Methodology

This section presents the research design, place of study, research participants, instruments, and ethical considerations of this study. This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, utilizing discourse analysis as the primary method. Data was gathered through individual interviews, sentence translations, narrative recounting using the Pear Film, and word utterances.

Research Design. The study selected Cebuano-speaking informants from Santa Josefa with great care to ensure high-quality data. Reputable individuals were chosen to maintain professionalism and data reliability. The sample included six informants, three men and three women, to allow for a comparison of vowel spaces and intonation patterns between genders.

Participants of the Study. The study selected Cebuano-speaking informants from Santa Josefa with great care to ensure high-quality data. Reputable individuals were chosen to maintain professionalism and data reliability. The sample included six informants, three men and three women, to allow for a comparison of vowel spaces and intonation patterns between genders.

Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process. Three main instruments were used for data collection:

1. Pear Film: An 11-minute silent film shown to participants, who then narrated the events in their own words, providing spontaneous speech samples based on a fixed narrative.
2. How-to Interview: Participants described the steps involved in creating a product of their choice, allowing for the collection of spontaneous speech based on personal knowledge.
3. 200-word List: A list of 200 English words translated by participants, recorded by researchers, providing phonetic data for orthographic analysis.

Data Analysis. The speech analysis software PRAAT, developed by linguists at the University of Amsterdam, was utilized to examine the acoustic characteristics of vowels. The analysis focused on the first two formant values (F1 and F2), which are resonances related to vocal tract cavities and are crucial for vowel articulation (Baart, 2012).

Research Ethics. Strict adherence to ethical protocols was maintained throughout the study. Permission was obtained from key school officials, and potential risks to participants were assessed and minimized, including physical, psychological, and socio-economic factors. Participants' rights to voluntary participation, privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent were protected. Additional ethical aspects such as recruitment, benefits, plagiarism, data integrity, conflict of interest, organizational permissions, technology issues, and authorship were also carefully considered.

Results and Discussion

This section deals with the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of data gathered. The data gathered were analyzed and interpreted to answer the problems stated.

1. Phonetic and phonological inventory of sounds

Understanding the phonetic and phonological inventory of a language is fundamental for linguistic analysis and documentation. This is especially true for regional dialects and variants, which may exhibit unique features distinct from the standard language. This discussion focuses on the phonetic and phonological characteristics of the Bisaya language, specifically as spoken in Santa Josefa, Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

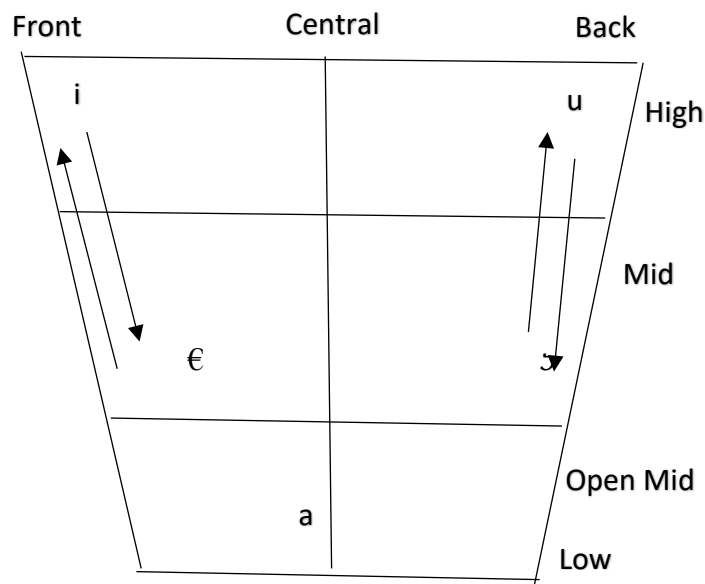


Figure 1. The Sta. Josefa Bisaya Vowels

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The insights derived from this analysis are critical for the preservation and promotion of this regional linguistic heritage. The phonetic inventory of Cebuano Visayan, including the Bisaya variant spoken in Santa Josefa, encompasses both vowel and consonant sounds. This inventory forms the basis of the spoken language, capturing the distinct sounds used in daily communication.

These vowels are consistent across various dialects of Cebuano Visayan, providing a stable core for the phonetic system. The language has sixteen consonant sounds: /p/: as in pato (duck); /t/: as in tawo (person); /k/: as in kabuhi (life); /b/: as in baboy (pig); /d/: as in dagat (sea); /g/: as in gubat (war); /m/: as in manok (chicken); /n/: as in nangka (jackfruit); /ŋ/: as in ngipon (tooth); /s/: as in suba (river); /h/: as in halas (snake); /w/: as in wa (none); /l/: as in langgam (bird); /r/: as in regalo (gift); /j/y/: as in yawa (devil); glottal stop /ʔ/. These consonant sounds are articulated with varying places and manners of articulation, contributing to the phonetic richness of the language.

Additionally, the glottal stop /ʔ/ is an important phoneme in Cebuano Visayan. It is often represented in orthography by a hyphen and occurs in various positions within words, contributing to the phonetic

distinctiveness of the language (Endrigna, 2010). They are divided into four groups based on how they are articulated: stops, fricatives, nasals, flaps, and approximants. Also, the consonants are categorized in their places of articulation based on the tongue positions: bilabial, dental/alveolar, velar, and glottal.

Table 1
 The Bisaya in Sta. Josefa Consonant Phonemes

Manner of Articulation	Places of Articulation							
	Bilabial		Dental/Alveolar		Velar		Glottal	
Stops	Voiced	Voiceless	Voiced	Voiceless	Voiced	Voiceless	Voiced	Voiceless
Stops	b	p	d	t	g	k	ʔ	
Fricatives				s				h
Nasal	m		n		ɲ			
Flap			r					
Approximants	w		l	y/j				

Source: <https://www.ijisrt.com/assets/upload/files/IJISRT23FEB832.pdf>

Phonological processes in Bisaya, as in other languages, involve rules that govern the sound structure of words. These processes include assimilation, vowel harmony, and stress patterns.

Assimilation occurs when a sound changes to become more like a neighboring sound. In Cebuano Visayan, nasal assimilation is common, where a nasal consonant changes its place of articulation to match the following consonant, such as in the word *pan* becoming [pam] before a bilabial sound.

Vowel harmony in Cebuano Visayan involves the influence of one vowel on another within a word, leading to more uniform vowel sounds. This process, though less prominent than in other languages, affects vowel pronunciation and can result in variations across different dialects.

Stress in Cebuano Visayan is phonemic, meaning that the placement of stress can change the meaning of words. For instance, *tíbo* (interest) versus *tubo* (sugarcane) demonstrates how stress placement alters word meaning. Stress typically falls on the penultimate syllable but can shift to the final syllable in specific contexts (Bunye & Yap, 1971).

Cebuano allows for various consonant clusters, especially at the beginning of words, which can include combinations like /kr/, /tr/, /gr/, /dr/, and /bl/. Understanding the sounds of Cebuano can greatly enhance pronunciation and comprehension for learners of the language. While the general phonetic and phonological inventory of Cebuano Visayan is well-documented, regional variations, such as those in Santa Josefa, Agusan del Sur, may exhibit unique characteristics. These variations could include differences in pronunciation, stress patterns, and the use of specific phonemes.

2. Bisaya in Sta. Josefa's word-formation processes

Word formation processes are essential in understanding how new words are created and how they evolve within a language. In the Bisaya language, specifically as spoken in Santa Josefa, Agusan del Sur, these processes are influenced by the language's phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures. This discussion explores the primary word formation processes in Bisaya, including affixation, compounding, reduplication, and borrowing, supported by linguistic research and specific examples.

Affixation is the most prominent word formation process in Bisaya, involving the addition of

prefixes, suffixes, infixes, and circumfixes to root words to create new words or alter their meanings.

Prefixes are added to the beginning of root words. For example: Ka-: Used to form nouns from adjectives or verbs, such as kalipay (happiness) from lipay (happy). Gi-: Indicates a completed action, as in gikuha (taken) from kuha (take) (Bunye & Yap, 1971). Suffixes are added to the end of root words to modify their meanings. For example: -an: forms nouns indicating place or instrument, such as balayan (settlement) from balay (house).

Circumfixes involve adding elements at both the beginning and end of a root word. For example: Ka-an: Used to form abstract nouns, such as kauban (companionship) from uban (companion) (Tanangkingsing, 2009). Bisaya in Sta. Josefa's root words changed forms in the above examples through the affixes attached, but their lexical categories remained unchanged. For example, the verb kaon (eat) changed the form to nikaon (ate) by adding the prefix ni, which became a contemplative form of a verb, which denotes that the action has already been completed.

Table 2
The Bisaya in Sta. Josefa Consonant Phonemes

Root Words	English	Inflected Words	English
lipay	happy	kalipay	happiness
kaon	eat	nikaon	ate (past)
		mokaon	will eat (future)
		nakaon	has eaten (present perfect)
		nagkaon	is eating (present progressive)
balay	house	balayan	A group of houses/a settlement
bata	child	mga bata	children (plural form)

In the same manner, adding the prefix mo- to the word will make it an imperfect tense of the verb; transforming it to motindog will stand up, thus making it an action still to be completed at some point in the future. As a result, the affixes added to Bisaya in Sta. Josefa root words provide additional information or grammatical structure. Kaon, the root word used in the examples, is a verb. No matter what affixes are added, they still function as verbs in that sense; the only difference is between their contemplative and imperfective tenses.

The plurality in Bisaya in Sta. Josefa is expressed periphrastically through mga. The root words, bata (child) and balay (house), are singular nouns. When the plural marker mga precedes them, they become plural, mga bata (persons); mga balay (houses), but remain a noun as their lexical category. In this case, the number changes, but not their lexical category. Inflectional morpheme combinations do not form new words (Delahunty & Garvey, 2010), and they merely alter the word in which they appear to denote grammatical features like plurality.

Conclusion

The in-depth exploration of Bisaya, a Cebuano variety spoken in Sta. Josefa highlights the importance of documenting this language. This study provides a grammatical analysis grounded in pedagogic grammar theory, focusing on the unique features of the language. It examined phonological, morphological, syntactic, and morphosyntactic aspects with the help of three main language consultants—

native speakers from different age groups—who carefully translated and recorded vocabulary and sentences to ensure pronunciation accuracy.

Although the Bisaya spoken in Sta. Josefa appears less complex than some other Philippine languages; its morphological structure reveals a moderate level of intricacy. The language presents interesting morphological patterns, especially in the use of affixes such as prefixes, infixes, and circumfixes, making it a rich area for further linguistic investigation. These features are valuable not only for linguists but also for MTBLE (Mother Tongue-Based Literacy Education) teachers and the local Bisayan-speaking community.

This research lays the groundwork for future studies in language documentation, including topics like dialectal variation across the Visayas and Mindanao, language contact, language preservation, migration, typology, and cross-linguistic comparison. Ultimately, this work supports the use of Bisaya as a mother tongue in education, promoting effective pedagogical methods and encouraging language preservation efforts in collaboration with the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP)

Recommendations

In light of the findings, it is recommended that further linguistic research be conducted on the Bisaya variety spoken in Sta. Josefa, particularly focusing on its dialectal variations, morphological patterns, and syntactic structures. Educational stakeholders, especially Mother Tongue-Based Literacy Education (MTBLE) teachers, should integrate the documented features of Bisaya into instructional materials to enhance literacy and language learning among young learners. Additionally, collaboration with the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and local communities is encouraged to promote language preservation initiatives. Finally, creating a comprehensive database of Bisaya vocabulary, phonetics, and grammar could serve as a valuable resource for linguists, educators, and future researchers, ensuring the continued documentation and promotion of this language.

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