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## Existential, possessive, and locative in Porohanon

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### Abstract

The three construction types –existential, possessive, and locative—have been traditionally-viewed as structurally and conceptually related to each other (Lyons 1967). The purpose of this study is to examine the supposed three construction types in Porohanon, a Bisayan variety spoken in the Camotes Islands, Cebu. In Porohanon, these constructions share a common predicate *ara* [ˈʔa:.raʔ], thereby meriting a collective and provisional label: the *ara*-clause. It is argued that in order to give a nuanced description of the *ara*-clause in Porohanon, three areas have to be taken into account and resolved: (1) the enclitic particle =y, (2) the semantic roles and interpretation of the core arguments, and (3) whether the seeming multifunctionality of *ara* is a case of polysemy, homophony, or none of the above.

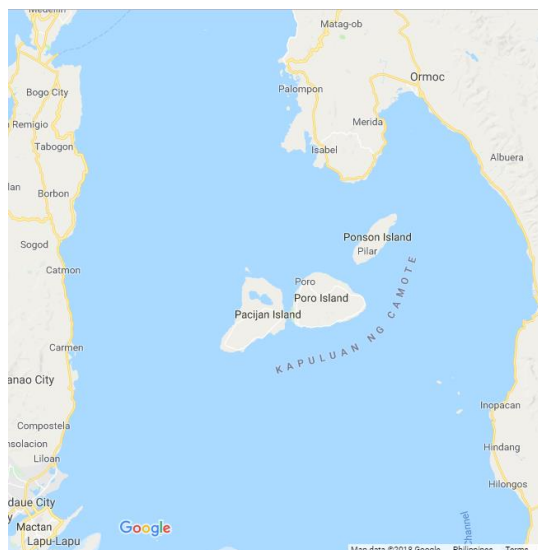
**Keywords:** *existential, possessive, locative, multifunctionality*

**ISO 639-3 language codes:** *prh*

### Introduction

#### Language information

Porohanon is primarily spoken in the Municipality of Poro, in the Camotes Islands, situated between the provinces of Cebu and Leyte, in the Visayas Region, Central Philippines. Classified as “Vigorous” (6a) on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) (Simons & Fennig 2019), it was reported to be spoken by around 23,000 people in 1960 (Wolff 1967).



It was Wolff (1967) who first published a linguistic description of Porohanon—calling it the “Camotes dialect” (p. 63). Despite his recognition of a substantial number of shibboleths including Porohanon’s (1) case-marking system (*construction markers and the meanings which they distinguish*), (2) deictic expressions (*the conjugation and distribution of adverbs referring to place*), and (3) intonation (*the way in which slow, careful speech forms and the rapid forms alternate*), Wolff considered Porohanon already a dialect of Cebuano Bisayan.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1. Google Maps. (2018). Camotes Islands. Map data ©2018 Google. Retrieved 16 May, 2018

1. This is a view that was echoed by Atty. Lourdito D. Borlasa who was actually Wolff’s key language helper and guide during the Cornell University professor’s 4-day stay in Poro.

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Nevertheless, he forwarded the hypothesis that Porohanon could be what remains of an earlier, non-Cebuano Bisayan substrate due to the very nature of these acknowledged shibboleths. According to him, “These features are not of a type that can be transferred from language to language” (p. 64).

Zorc (1977) also accounted for Porohanon in his monumental study of the Bisayan languages and dialects. His seems to be the first published work that recognized the endonym “Porohanon” (*puruhánun*) (Zorc 1977, p. 14) alongside Wolff’s “Camotes dialect”.<sup>2</sup> He assigns Porohanon to his “Peripheral Central Bisayan” subgroup (alongside North Sorsoganon, Masbatenyo, Bantayanon, Hiligaynon, Capiznon, and Kawayan) (p. 32) and considers it a “transitional dialect” (p. 170) between Sebuwano and Hiligaynon.

### **Objective & Scope**

This brief paper is an analysis of the following constructions in Porohanon. I will be referring to these constructions collectively and provisionally as the *ara*-clause:

- 1) *Aray Ginoo*  
ara=y            Ginoo  
EXIST=PRT    God  
‘There is a God.’<sup>3</sup>
  
- 2) *Aray buwak an daga*  
ara=y            bu:wak            an=da:ga  
POSS=PRT    flower            NOM=young.lady  
‘The young lady has a flower.’
  
- 3) *Ara sa bay an daga*  
ara    sa=ba:y            an=da:ga  
LOC    OBL=house    NOM=young.lady  
‘The young lady is in the house.’

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2. One of my consultants, Mr. Edwin Marquez, also reports the label *tinaga-Poro* ‘(lit.) of-those-from-Poro’.

3. Symbols and abbreviations to be used in this paper: - - morpheme boundary; = - clitic; 1 – first-person; 2 – second-person; 3 – third-person; COMP – complementizer; EXIST – existential; GEN – genitive; INTR – intransitive; LKR – linker; LOC – locative; NEUT – neutral marker; NOM – nominative; OBL – oblique; PL – plural; POSS – possessive; PRT – particle; SG – singular; REAL – realis; Q - question



**=y as Neutral Marker**

Most informal learners or non-native speakers of Binisaya (perhaps I'm just referring to myself here) are stumped with the meaning and function of the enclitic particle =y. Take, for example, this true-to-life scene at Laguindingan Airport, Cagayan de Oro:

- 6) Airport Security: *Naa bay durian diha, sir?*  
'Is there durian there, sir?'

V. C. S.: \**Naay*  
'There is'

The ungrammaticality of the response of the person with initials V.C.S. stems from the fact that the predicate *naa* 'EXIST' is not followed by any argument, and is merely a response to the question. Thus, it does not need the enclitic particle =y.

Tanangkingsing (2009), in his functional reference grammar of the Binisaya spoken in Cebu, characterizes this enclitic particle as a "neutral marker" which "marks referents that are mostly **indefinite** (in the case of existential clauses and interrogatives) [emphasis mine]" (p. 108).

This neutral marker can also be observed in Porohanon. Going back to the first two examples:

- 1) *Aray Ginoo*  
ara=y                      Ginoo  
EXIST=NEUT              God  
'There is a God.'
- 2) *Aray buwak an daga*  
ara=y              bu:wak              an=da:ga  
POSS= NEUT flower              NOM=young.lady  
'The young lady has a flower.'

The arguments *Ginoo* 'God' in sentence 1) and *buwak* 'flower' in sentence 2) both have an indefinite interpretation, i.e. the addressee cannot identify the referent in a given context (Summer Institute of Linguistics 2003). The opposite **definite** interpretation of the above arguments does not seem to work:

- 1) *Aray Ginoo*  
ara=y                      Ginoo  
EXIST=NEUT              God  
?'There is **the** God. (in that both speaker and addressee identify a single, identical *God*)'

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### 2) *Aray buwak an daga*

ara=y            bu:wak            an=da:ga  
POSS= NEUT flower            NOM=young.lady

?‘The young lady has **the** flower.

(in that both speaker and addressee, without visual cues, identify an identical *flower*)’

In order for an argument to receive a definite interpretation in an *ara*-clause, it has to be marked with NOM *an*, i.e. be cast as the most privileged syntactic argument. This is the case in the third sentence:

### 3) *Ara sa bay an daga*

ara            sa=ba:y            an=da:ga  
LOC            OBL=house            NOM=young.lady

‘**The** young lady is in the house.’

It is presumed that both the speaker and the addressee in 3) are able to identify the same, particular *daga* ‘young lady’ in the sentence (out of all the possible representatives of *daga*). Therefore, it need not be marked with the neutral marker =y.

In the previously-given example 5), the argument *kuwarta* ‘money’, despite being marked with the neutral marker =y, requires another constituent, the linked modifier *200* ‘Php 200’ to identify the exact amount.

### 5) *Nangutana siza kun ara ba koy kuwarta nga 200.*

n-(p)angutana=siza  
INTR.REAL-question=3SG.NOM

kun    ara=ba=ko=y  
COMP POSS=Q.PRT=1SG.NOM=NEUT  
‘He asked me if I had 200 pesos.’

**kuwarta=nga=200**  
money=LKR=200 pesos  
(J.A. *Unforgettable experience*)

To summarize, the neutral marker =y, as described by Tanangkingsing (2009) for Sebuwano and which is also present in Porohanon serves to mark an argument with an indefinite interpretation. The semantic role of this indefinitely-marked argument is discussed in the next section.

## **Indefinite Argument as THEME**

Kroeger (2005, p. 54), in his 13-semantic role inventory, defines THEME as such:

“THEME: entity which undergoes a change of location or possession, or whose location is being specified”

This seems to be the most appropriate semantic role to capture the relation of the arguments to the predicate *ara*, at least in the second (=”possessive”) and third (=”locative”) *ara*-clauses.

The THEME semantic role, at least as defined by Kroeger (2005), does not seem to adequately capture the role of the single argument in the clause *Aray Ginoo* ‘There is a God.’ It does not undergo any change of location or possession. Nor is its location being specified. Its “mere” existence is simply being predicated upon.

This stems from the special nature of the meaning we ascribe to the argument *Ginoo*. Who, at least according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, is an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent being; **therefore, whose particular physical location or possession by another entity cannot be specified.**

Ramos & Ceña (1980) point out that for sentences such as the Tagalog:

6) *May sunog!*  
EXIST fire  
‘There’s a fire!’

“Our understanding of the meaning of sentences like the above is that the location of the existent is unspecified. (**When such an utterance is heard in real life, one assumes that the location of the fire is in the immediate vicinity.**) [emphasis mine]” (p. 25)

Thus, the seeming inapplicability of the THEME semantic role to the *ara*-clause *Aray Ginoo* ‘There is a God’ stems not from a different thematic structure, but the special nature of the meaning of the argument *Ginoo* ‘God’. Without trying to offend religious sensibilities, the same kind of special meaning can be observed if we replace it with other imaginary beings:

7) *Aray (kapre, toothfairy, Loch Ness monster, ...)*  
‘There exists a *kapre*, toothfairy, Loch Ness monster, etc.’

The semantic role THEME still successfully covers and accounts for the relation of the core arguments of the *ara*-clause with its predicate *ara*.

### **Multifunctionality of *ara*?**

The title of this brief paper is but a nod to other like-titled studies (Lyons 1967, Ramos & Ceña 1980, Zeitoun et al. 1999, and several more). I also intended for the title to echo the “received-wisdom” from Dr. Constantino’s analysis of Philippine syntax, in which the existential, possessive, and locative are viewed as “non-predicative sentences” (1965, p. 103). This analysis is, of course, reflected in the UP Department of Linguistics’ 775-Sentence List in which the category “Existential, Possessive, and Locative Sentences” is set-apart from “Mga Porma ng Pandiwa [Forms of Verbs]”.

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But as I have discussed in the above sections, for Porohanon, *ara* **is still a predicate** that 1) has its own argument and thematic structure, and, moreover, 2) predicates **on the existence** of an argument with an indefinite interpretation. Thus, I depart from the analysis that the existential, possessive, and locative is non-predicative.

It seems that the supposed, distinct “possessive” and “locative” senses of the predicate *ara* are merely extensions of the “existential” proposition in a sentence such as *Aray Ginoo* ‘There is a God’. These other supposedly distinct senses are derived from **the presence of the other arguments**, whether it be the argument marked as NOM, as in 2), or the one relegated as an OBL as in 3):

### 2) *Aray buwak an daga*

ara=y            bu:wak            an=da:ga  
POSS=PRT    flower            NOM=young.lady  
‘The young lady has a flower.’

### 3) *Ara sa bay an daga*

ara    sa=ba:y            an=da:ga  
LOC   OBL=house    NOM=young.lady  
‘The young lady is in the house.’

In sentence 2), it is still the existence of the *buwak* ‘flower’ that is being predicated upon. But it is extended to its ‘existence-in-possession’ of the *daga* ‘young lady’. Meanwhile, in sentence 3), it is still the existence of the *daga* ‘young lady’ that is being predicated upon. But it is extended to its ‘existence-in-location’ of the *bay* ‘house’.

This is a view that is somewhat parallel to the one articulated by McFarland (1978, p.12) for Tagalog:

“I conclude that there is but one type of existential construction with but one general meaning.”

Furthermore:

“Thus we may conclude that the meaning is not ‘possession’ or ‘indefiniteness’, or existence’, but some meaning that is an average combination of all three. Whatever we decide, **it is a single meaning and not three distinct meanings**. There is one existential construction, not three. [emphasis mine]”

I share the view that it is a single meaning, with extensions into possession and location owing the presence of other arguments. However, that single meaning is still an existential proposition, and not “an average combination of all three”, as per McFarland.



## Conclusion and Implications for Further Study

Three main points were made in this brief presentation, regarding the *ara*-clause in Porohanon:

- a) that =y is a “neutral marker” (Tanangkingsing 2009) signifying an indefinite interpretation of the immediately-succeeding argument;
- b) that this core argument with an indefinite interpretation possesses the semantic role of THEME (Kroeger 2005, p. 54); and
- c) that the seeming multiple functions of *ara* are but extensions of the core existential meaning. (cf: McFarland 1978, for Tagalog)

The very immediate implication of this for my ongoing project of a grammatical sketch of Porohanon is that I will have to revise (in consultation with my professor) my current outline, in particular, the section on “Special Construction Types”.

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