

Philippine Historical and Comparative Linguistics from Below¹

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Abstract

The field of historical linguistics in the Philippines has seen significant developments since its early beginnings in the 1900s, but several questions regarding the relationships among the languages remain unresolved. Current findings indicate a more complex scenario, which involves not

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only traditional genetic relationship, but also intense and sustained contact among the communities at different scales and time depths.

In this paper, we emphasize an integrated approach for historical linguistics, which considers small-scale contexts, layers of histories, and more fine-grained analyses of data to inform our linguistic reconstructions more fully. Case studies in Ibatan, Porohanon, and the Southwestern and Southeastern Mindanao languages are presented to illustrate how linguistic histories are inextricably tied to complex community histories.

Such a context-dependent approach yields mosaics of micro-histories that are sensitive to “complex geography, ecological disasters, history of migrations and settlement” (Klamer, 2019, p. 19), which can potentially address long overdue questions on the nature of linguistic relationships, points of dispersal of populations, the agents of change, and the spread of innovations across speakers. This proposed future direction for the field of historical linguistics in the Philippines is one which is approached from below—localized and richly informed by fine-grained and on-the-ground case studies led by local scholars in close collaboration with members of the communities in consideration.

Keywords: historical linguistics, language change, context-dependent, micro-histories

1 Introduction: The Comparative Method and a bird's eye view of the Philippine languages

The Philippines, with over a hundred indigenous languages, occupies an important position in Austronesian prehistory as it is assumed to be the first landing point of Austronesian speakers out of Taiwan. The apparent similarity of the Philippine languages has been noted as early as 1604 by Pedro Chirino (cited in Reid, 2017, pp. 2–3): “There is no single or general language of the Filipinas extending throughout the islands; but all of them, though there are many and different tongues, are so much alike that they may be learned and spoken in a short time.”

How did the similarities among the Philippine languages arise? Establishing genetic relationships among languages is done through the Comparative Method of historical linguistics, which involves a systematic comparison of linguistic features (primarily core vocabulary) among a set of languages. This method is also used to determine the internal subgrouping of a language family, through the identification of innovations uniquely shared by a subset of languages within the family, with the assumption that these innovations have developed as a result of a single, shared history of linguistic development. Through this method, it has long been widely recognized that the similarities among the Philippine languages are due to their shared ancestry, under the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family (cf. Dyen, 1965; Haudricourt, 1965; Salazar, 2012).

However, while there is a consensus about the higher-order branches of the Austronesian language family, the establishment of the lower-order branches of the family, including the development and position of

the Philippine languages, is still an open question. Recent works such as those of Klammer (2019) and Smith (2017, 2023, 2025) have begun to question the “classical model” of the Austronesian language family in favor of a flat, rake-like tree, based on a critical re-examination of the evidence for the major intermediary branches of the family.

The same trend can be observed for the Philippine languages. Early works take the apparent unity of the languages as indicative of a single Philippine subgroup (cf. Blake, 1906; Charles, 1974; Conant, 1908, 1911, 1912; Llamzon, 1975; Scheerer, 1918). Home-grown linguists, namely Cecilio Lopez and Consuelo Paz, have also contributed significantly to historical studies on Philippine languages. Lopez (1928, 1939, 1967, 1976, 1978), being the first Filipino historical linguist, worked on the compilation of comparative Philippine word lists, as well as on the origins of the Philippine languages. Succeeding Lopez, Paz (1981) continued the historical studies on the Philippines through her reconstruction of Proto-Philippines (PPH) based on firsthand data on 29 languages. However, the validity of PPH needs to be established by exclusively shared innovations among the daughter languages. PPH has then been placed under serious scrutiny, with questions regarding the quality and quantity of the purported innovations. On the one hand, Blust (2005, 2019, 2020) and Zorc (1986, 2020) argue in favor of PPH based on a significant number of lexical innovations. On the other hand, Liao (2020), Reid (1982, 2020), and Ross (2005, 2020) argue against it, and claim that the overlapping distribution of the proposed

innovations across Philippine languages is more indicative of a linkage history.²

Blust (2019, pp. 183-184; 2020, pp. 453-454) acknowledges that such overlapping pattern is indeed observable among the Philippine languages, implying a scenario where the languages do not form a single homogeneous subgroup. However, the main point of contention among the scholars is regarding the level at which the Philippine languages descended from a single common language. Ross (2020, p. 369) writes that Proto-Malayo-Polynesian (PMP) is the protolanguage for this early Philippine dialect network, but Blust (2020, p. 452) argues that it is PPH, in that the innovations he enumerates are exclusively found in Philippine languages and not elsewhere in Malayo-Polynesian, especially among languages spoken south of the Philippines.

The PPH debate remains unresolved primarily because of the quality of the proposed innovations for the subgroup. That is, the major evidence supporting PPH lies within the lexical domain, which can alternatively be explained via diffusion in a linkage, or borrowing across languages (see Smith, 2017, 2025 for a critical overview). However, there is also a challenge in arguing for a linkage history for the Philippine languages, given that the innovations supporting linkages tend to have low evidentiary value compared to those observed in innovation-defined subgroups (Ross, 2020, p. 370). Adding further complexity to the matter is how linguistic signals attributed to linkages tend to be similar to those attributed to language contact, where linguistic features have developed not out of common descent, but instead, from borrowing.

²Zorc and Almarines (2021) and Zorc et al. (2024) use the term *axis* to describe the same relationship.

Abandoning PPH in favor of a Philippine linkage, moreover, raises the question of how the Philippine languages are situated within the linkage. The languages are grouped under thirteen widely invoked subgroups, listed below according to their rough geographic locations along the Philippine archipelago (Zorc et al., 2024):

1. Batanic/Bashiic
2. Northern Luzon/Cordilleran
3. Central Luzon
4. Umiray Dumaget
5. Manide-Alabat
6. North Mangyan
7. Greater Central Philippine (and Palawanic)
8. Kalamianic
9. Inati
10. Southwestern Mindanao
11. Southeastern Mindanao
12. Sangiric
13. Minahasan

Some subgroups are fairly well-established by unique innovations, whereas some have been largely assumed based on geography and lexicostatistical evidence rather than on exclusively shared innovations.³

³For instance, Reid (2006, pp. 4–7) critiques the arguments in the literature supporting Cordilleran/Northern Luzon, a large subgroup mainly founded on lexicostatistical evidence. Responding to the gap in the literature, he identified two phonological innovations supporting the subgroup, namely the loss of word-final glottal stop and a unique metathesis involving the consonants *t and *s. In addition, over 750 unique lexical items have been identified as innovations supporting the subgroup. However, these purported innovations are likewise not universally shared by the Cordilleran/Northern Luzon languages, such as the metathesis of PMP *t and

The Greater Central Philippine subgroup, specifically, is established based on one phonological innovation (the merger of PMP *R and *g) along with a set of lexical innovations (Blust, 1991), but as with PPH, teasing apart the quality of the supposed innovations weakens the validity of the subgroup.

Aside from the validity of each subgroup, it is also uncertain how the subgroups precisely relate to each other. For instance, Zorc and Almarines (2021) and Zorc et al. (2024) discuss axis relationships among certain language groups (similar to linkages discussed above), in which putative innovations cross linguistic boundaries, seen in Bashiic-Ilocano, North Bisayan, and Eastern Mindanao, among others.

From a bird's eye view, it has been sufficiently established in the literature that the Philippine languages are indeed related. But from a worm's eye view, as demonstrated in the discussion above, there are still many questions regarding the details of this relationship. Recent works in historical linguistics push for more nuanced reconstructions which take into equal consideration small-scale contexts, layers of histories, and more fine-grained analyses of data (Muysken, 2010; Pakendorf, 2014; Romaine, 1982; Ross, 2003, 2013; among others). This development in the field highlights the iterative process of the Comparative Method: subgrouping hypotheses and reconstructions are informed and refined by new analyses, data, and perspectives.

*s: PAN/PMP *tapus 'end, complete, finish' > Bontok *tapus*, Ibaloy *tapos*, Ilocano *tapus*; PAN/PMP *tastas 'sever, cut through, rip out stitches' > Kankanaey *satsat*, Pangasinan *satsat*, but Bontok *tastas*, Ibaloy *tastas*, Arta *tastas* (Blust et al., 2023); PMP *tanis* 'weep, cry, mourn' > Ilocano *sangit*, Itneg *sangit*, but Ibaloi *nangngis*, Kallahan *nangih* (Greenhill et al., 2008).

Focusing on the Philippines, current data suggest a more complex relationship among the languages which involves not only traditional genetic relationship, but also intense and sustained contact among the communities at different scales and time depths. In this paper, we highlight the need to approach the field from below, resulting in mosaics of micro-histories that are sensitive to “complex geography, ecological disasters, history of migrations and settlement” (Klamer, 2019, p. 19). Such views from below are negotiated against our classical model of linguistic development (the view from above), and this dual perspective will hopefully yield a more nuanced picture of the history of the Philippine languages.

In Section 2, we present case studies that illustrate the complex histories of the Philippine languages, demonstrating that there are multiple pathways for languages to develop. Section 3 and Section 4 lay out the future direction for historical linguistics in the Philippines—one which is localized and richly informed by fine-grained and on-the-ground case studies led by local scholars in close collaboration with members of the communities in consideration.

2 Language change and social histories: Some illustrative cases

It is common knowledge that languages do not develop in a simple, unidirectional manner. As languages are ultimately tied to their speakers, the complex social histories of the communities, which involve multiple migrations, separations and reconnections with homelands, as well as dense and multiplex social networks, make

untangling linguistic relationships more challenging. Without going beyond lexico-phonological data that have been the primary evidence presented in the literature, we cannot really see any way forward regarding longstanding debates and questions. This section further demonstrates this complexity by looking at three case studies that illustrate different ways the Philippine languages have developed.

2.1 Ibatan of the Batanic subgroup

The Batanic subgroup consists of four languages spoken on the islands bordering the Philippines and Taiwan: (a) Yami (ISO 639-3 [*tao*]), also known as Tao, spoken on the island of Lanyu (Orchid Island), Taiwan, (b) Itbayaten, spoken on Itbayat Island, Batanes, (c) Ivatan [*ivv*], with dialects Ivasay and Isamorong, spoken on the islands of Batan and Sabtang in Batanes, and (d) Ibatan [*ivb*], spoken on Babuyan Claro, Cagayan.

The position of Ibatan within the Batanic subgroup is uncontroversial, particularly its close relationship with Ivatan. Evidence from genealogical records and oral history corroborate linguistic evidence—the Ibatan people indeed trace their ancestry to the Ivatans of Batanes (J. Maree, 2005; R. Maree, 1982). However, teasing apart the features of the Ibatan language highlights how contact plays an equally important role in its history.

Ibatan is distinguished from the rest of the Batanic subgroup based on several contact-induced features across the domains of the lexicon, phonology, and morphosyntax, most of which are traced to Ilocano, the main language in contact with Ibatan.

In terms of phonology, Ibatan differs from the other Batanic languages regarding the realization of Proto-Batanic *b. The consonant *b weakened to a fricative *v* word-initially and medially in all the Batanic languages except for Ibatan (Gallego, 2014). The following examples from Tsuchida et al. (1987) are illustrative.

Table 1. Reflexes of Proto-Batanic *b in the Batanic languages

	‘fat’	‘string’	‘to sneeze’
Yami	<i>tava</i>	<i>ovid</i>	<i>vanan</i>
Itbayat	<i>tava</i>	<i>xovid</i>	<i>va’nan</i>
Ivasay	<i>tava</i>	<i>hovid</i>	<i>va’nan</i>
Isamorong	<i>tava</i>	<i>hovid</i>	<i>vanan</i>
Ibatan	<i>taba</i>	<i>hobid</i>	<i>banan</i>

Based on the close relationship between Ivatan (with dialects Ivasay and Isamorong) and Ibatan, this lenition of the consonant is assumed to have also applied in pre-Ibatan, but because of the influence of Ilocano, which does not have the consonant in its phoneme system, a subsequent change involving pre-Ibatan lenited *v* led to its neutralization back to the form *b*, which is now the current form in Ibatan. The change is likely driven by speakers of Ilocano who learned Ibatan, and through the process of imposition of Ilocano phonology, the pre-Ibatan fricative *v* was approximated with its closest Ilocano counterpart *b*, ultimately reshaping the sound system of Ibatan.

In terms of morphosyntax, there are several formatives that have arisen because of the influence of Ilocano. An example is the pluralization of human nouns, where Ibatan shows two different reduplication patterns. The native pattern involves the reduplication of the first consonant and vowel sequence of the root (i.e., C_1V_1), as

in *ka~kaanakan* from the root *kaanakan* ‘nephew’ in (1). In cases involving the pluralization of Ilocano loanwords, namely *baro* ‘young man,’ *barito* ‘teenage boy,’ *balasang* ‘teenage girl,’ and *baket* ‘wife/old woman,’ the Ilocano pattern is carried over, that is, *babbaro* ‘young men,’ *babbarito* ‘teenage boys,’ *babbalasang* ‘teenage girls,’ and *babbaket* ‘wives/old women’ respectively, which all involve the reduplication of the $C_1V_1C_1$ sequence (2).

- (1) Native reduplication $C_1V_1C_1$ with native stem *kaanakan* ‘nephew’ (R. Maree, 2007, pp. 39–40)

Siraw kakaanakan saw ni Pidel...

Siraw ka~kaanakan sa=aw ni Pidel

3PL.ABS RDP~nephew.IVB⁴ 3PL.ABS=REF GEN Pidel

‘Then the deer walked toward the cliff.’

- (2) Ilocano reduplication $C_1V_1C_1$ with Ilocano stem *balasang* ‘teenage girl’ (R. Maree, 2007, pp. 39–40)

Myan asa poho a babbalasang a nanghap so lakay da katakatayisa.

Myan asa.poho a bab~balasang a nanghap so

EXIST ten LNK RDP~teenage.girl.ILO LNK got GEN

lakay da katakatayisa.

husband 3PL.GEN each.one

‘There are ten women who got a husband.’

⁴In this tier, the etymology of the relevant morpheme in discussion is indicated either as IVB (Ibatan) or ILO (Ilocano). This is seen in examples (1) to (4).

Another example of Ilocano influence on Ibatan is the two ways of deriving ordinals, namely the affixes *cha-* and *maika-*, in which the latter has been transferred from Ilocano. To illustrate, the ordinal ‘second’ may be derived as *cha-dadwa* or *maika-dadwa* (R. Maree, 2007, p. 95).

A final example in the domain of morphosyntax is the parallel paradigms for deriving actor voice durative verbs in Ibatan (Gallego, 2023). Native stems such as *abang* ‘rowboat’ are derived with the native set of durative prefixes (3), whereas non-native stems such as *lampitaw* ‘motorboat’ are derived with the non-native set (4).

- (3) Native durative *nay-* with native stem *abang* ‘rowboat’ (R. Maree, 2007, p. 174)

Nayabang *si adi a nangay do Calayan*

Nay-abang *si adi* *a nangay do*

PFV.AV-rowboat.IVB ABS younger.sibling LNK went LOC

Calayan.

Calayan

‘Younger sibling rode on a rowboat going to Calayan.’

- (4) Non-native durative *nag-* with non-native stem *lampitaw* ‘motorboat’ (R. Maree, 2007, p. 174)

Naglampitaw *si adi a nangay do Calayan.*

Nag-lampitaw *si adi* *a nangay do*

PFV.AV-motor.boat.ILO ABS younger.sibling LNK went LOC

Calayan.

Calayan

‘Younger sibling rode on a motorboat going to Calayan’

The use of the parallel durative paradigms is typically predictable, that is, either as native formations (native affix + native stem), or as complex loanwords (non-native affix + non-native stem), but there are also instances of hybrid formations, or combinations of native and non-native materials, and other unexpected formations (cf. Gallego, 2023 for a detailed discussion).

These examples across different areas of grammar in Ibatan illustrate layers of contact-induced features, primarily influenced by Ilocano. Contact outcomes are argued to be linked to different agents of change, that is, dominant and non-dominant speakers of Ibatan. The accumulation of social change in the 150 years of the Babuyan Claro community involves changing patterns of agentivity, language dominance, and population structure, which continue to shape the Ibatan language (cf. Gallego, 2022b for a full discussion).

2.2 Porohanon of the Bisayan complex

Porohanon of the Municipality of Poro, in the Camotes Islands, Province of Cebu (ISO 639-3 [*prh*]) has been described as a sort of hybrid variety exhibiting features from different lects scattered across the highly interactive island network of the Central Philippines: Masbatenyo, Waray, Bantayanon, and Hiligaynon (Lobel, 2006; Wolff, 1967; Zorc, 1977). Notably, community members affirm the scholarly accounts by acknowledging their links with Waray- and Hiligaynon-speaking communities (Santiago, 2024).

Over the decades, however, there has been a marked increase in Standard Cebuano⁵ features in Porohanon grammar—even more than what has been described in linguistic work in the 1960s and 70s. In this sub-section, we focus on three areas of the grammar to highlight Porohanon’s steady drift to more Standard Cebuano structures, namely articles, pronouns, and conjunctions, closing with a discussion on the sociohistorical factors that have probably driven these processes.

Porohanon distinguishes between specific and nonspecific case markers in the absolutive (ABS), ergative (ERG), genitive (GEN) cases, and obliques (OBL) for common nouns. There are also corresponding personal articles for these:

Table 2. Porohanon case markers

	ABSOLUTIVE	ERGATIVE/GENITIVE	OBLIQUE
SPECIFIC	<i>an, ang</i>	<i>san, sa</i>	<i>sa</i>
NONSPECIFIC	<i>in, =y</i>	<i>sin</i>	<i>sa</i>
PERSONAL	<i>si</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>ka</i>

For the specific ABS, nonspecific ABS, and specific ERG/GEN, the forms in the left are the original Porohanon forms recorded in Wolff (1967) and Zorc (1977), while the alternants in the right have started to appear in Porohanon referential expressions even if they are more associated with Standard Cebuano. In each of the following sample sentences, the Standard Cebuano articles occur alongside forms more associated with Porohanon. Specifically, in (5), *amun* ‘1SG.GEN.EXCL’

⁵Or at least “Cebuano as spoken in Cebu City” (E. Carcellar, personal communication, 24 March, 2022). Endriga (2010, p. 11) traces the basis of this standard to the Sialo variety of Southeastern Cebu.

and *sara* ‘now,’ both attested in the everyday contemporary speech of Porohanon, exist alongside *ang*, which is the Standard Cebuano article. The form *ara* ‘EXIST’ in (6) serves as host to the cliticized *=y* ‘nonspecific ABS,’ which is once again, a Standard Cebuano shibboleth. And finally, *an* ‘ABS.SPEC’ in (7) occurs with the *sa* ‘specific ERG/GEN’ of Standard Cebuano in the same sentence.

- (5) *Amun ipahibaw sa tanan na ang atun Mobile Blood Donation Activity sarang Agosto 21, 2020 kay dili madazun tungod sa mga kakulian.* (RHU Poro, 2020)
- Amun* *i-pa-hibaw* *sa=tanan na*
 IPL.GEN.EXCL.PRE TR.IPFV-CAUS-know GEN=all PRT
ang=atun=Mobile.Blood.Donation.Activity
 ABL.SPEC.CEB=IPL.GEN.INCL.PRE=**Mobile.Blood.Donation.Activity**⁶
sara=ng Agosto.21.2020 kay dili ma-dazun
 now=LNK August.21.2020 CONJ NEG INTR.IPFV-continue
tungod sa=mga=kakulian
 because GEN=DIV=difficulty
 ‘We would like to let everyone know that our Mobile Blood Donation Activity this August 21, 2020 is cancelled due to difficulties.’

⁶Similar to Section 2.1 the etymology or development of the relevant morpheme/structure is indicated either as CEB (Cebuano) or PRH (Porohanon).

- (6) *Ara pa kitay first dose sa Pfizer ugma puhon!* (RHU Poro, 2020)

Ara=pa kita=y=first.dose

EXIST=PRT 2PL.ABS.INCL=ABS.NON-SPECIFIC.CEB=**first.dose**

sa=Pfizer ugma puhon

GEN.SPEC.CEB=**Pfizer** tomorrow hopefully

‘Hopefully, we will still have a first dose of Pfizer tomorrow.’

- (7) *Gisuwat sa taw an pangan sa daga.* (Santiago, 2024, p. 83)⁷

Gi-suwat sa=taw an=pangan

TR.PFV-write ERG.SPEC.CEB=**person** ABS.SPEC=name

sa=daga

GEN.SPEC.CEB=**young.woman**

‘The person wrote the young woman’s name.’

In terms of pronouns, Porohanon has some pronominal structures that distinguish it from Standard Cebuano, such as the clipping of *siza* ‘3SG.ABS’ to *za* (8).

- (8) Clipping of 3SG.ABS *siza* to *za*

Naminaw za sa tambag nimu? (Santiago, 2024b)⁸

N-(p)aminaw=(si)za sa=tambag=nimu

INTR.PFV-question=3SG.ABS.PRH OBL=advice-2SG.GEN.POS

‘Did s/he listen to your advice?’

Other parts of the pronominal system, however, have not resisted Standard Cebuano influence. The OBL personal pronoun series used to consistently show the traditional Porohanon *d*-formative described by Zorc (1977), detailed in Table 3:

⁷This example was given by language consultant Alvin Jay Donaire.

⁸This example was given by language consultant Alvin Jay Donaire.

Table 3. Porohanon oblique personal pronouns according to Zorc (1977, pp. 72-73)

1	SINGULAR		<i>d-akun</i>
	PLURAL	INCLUSIVE	<i>d-atun</i>
		EXCLUSIVE	<i>d-amun</i>
2	SINGULAR		<i>d-imu</i>
	PLURAL		<i>d-inzu</i>
3	SINGULAR		<i>d-iza</i>
	PLURAL		<i>d-ila</i>

Only extremely marginal instances of these were found in the data gathered between the years 2018 and 2022, as illustrated in (9).

- (9) *Makabazad kaman ga sa imo gibuhad **dakon*** (Santiago, 2024, p. 97)⁹

Maka-bazad ka=man=ga(zod) sa.imo gi-buhad

ABIL-pay 2SG.ABS.POS=PRT=PRT 2SG.POSS UV.PFV-do

dakon

ISG.OBL.PRH

‘You are really going to pay for what you have done to me.’

The preferred formation has been the use of the genitive specific article *sa(n)* combined with the genitive preposed pronoun to mark the possessive relation as in (10). This strategy is similar to the structure of Cebuano.

⁹This example was given by language consultant Gifsy R. Castro.

- (10) ... *nga, na wa ko san akon kaugalingon* (Santiago, 2024, p. 96)¹⁰

nga na-wa=ko

san.akon=kaugalingon

LNK AV.PFV-lose=ISG.ABS.POS 2SG.POSS.ISG.POSS.CEB=self

‘That, I was unaware of what happened (lit. I lost myself).’

Finally, for Porohanon conjunctions, the coordinating conjunction *ug* ‘and’ associated with Standard Cebuano has been rising in frequency alongside the original Porohanon form *nan* (Zorc, 1977, p. 155), with the alternant *ngan* also closely associated with Ninorte Samarnon, Samar-Leyte, and Waray (ibid.). Sentences (11) and (12) show *ug* with other forms more associated with Porohanon.

- (11) *Salamat kaazo ug maazong pagbasa sa Porohanon Newsletter!*
(Municipality of Poro, 2018, p. 1)

Salamat kaazo ug ma-azo=ng=pag-basa

thank.you PRT CONJ.CEB STAT-good=LNK=NMLZ-read

sa=Porohanon.Newsletter

OBL=Porohanon.Newsletter

‘Thank you very much and have a good time reading the Porohanon Newsletter.’

¹⁰This example was given by language consultant Joseph Lacbayo Andriano.

- (12) *Palig-onon an immune system (pinaagi sa pagkaon sin mga prutas, utanon, ug baytamins nga makaazo sa lawas* Marquez, 2020
pa-lig-on-on an=immune.system pinaagi
 CAUS-strong-TR ABS.SPEC=immune.system through
sa=pag-kaon sin=mga=prutas utanon
 GEN.SPEC=NMLZ-eat GEN.NON-SPECIFIC=DIV=fruit vegetable
ug baytamins=nga=maka-azo sa=lawas
 CONJ.CEB vitamins=LNK=ABIL-good GEN.SPEC=body
 ‘Strengthen the immune system through eating fruits, vegetables,
 and vitamins that are good for your body.’

The changes in Porohanon’s articles, pronouns, and conjunctions outlined above seem to counter the assumption that these are areas of grammar that are more resistant to change and external influence; “the type of elements of vocabulary,” Wolff (1967), “which are not readily subject to replacement” (p. 64).¹¹

We might begin to address the question of why Porohanon has begun shifting to these more Standard Cebuano constructions by taking into account the social structure and history of the Municipality of Poro. As early as 1570, *visitas*, or specific mission areas designated by the Spanish religious orders in the Philippines, were already being ministered in Poro by the Jesuits based in Leyte and Mandaue, Cebu (Reyes & Conde, 2014). Jumping to the early 20th Century, powerful political families in mainland Cebu have maintained lands and properties on the island (Cullinane, 1994; Reyes & Conde, 2014). Seacraft have also

¹¹On a wider scale, Chen et al. (2022) have provided evidence that even voice morphology can diffuse across separate subgroups of languages spoken in the Philippines.

regularly plied the channels between major cities in Cebu like Danao and Mandaue, Ormoc City in Leyte, and Poro (Mangilit, 2011; Reyes & Conde, 2014; Wernstedt & Spencer, 1967). People from Luzon and other parts of the country also know Camotes well for its white sand beaches, thus tourism is also a major factor for the influx of people and their interactions with Porohanons. Data from the Tourism Office of the municipality states that from January-December 2017, 66,327 tourists from other parts of the Province of Cebu visited Poro (Borlasa, 2017). Porohanons readily accommodate these visitors by shifting to the lingua franca. Use of Standard Cebuano in more formal settings such as in church, written correspondence, and public addresses is the typical scenario.

Thus, we see multiple layers of contact from more remote time periods to more contemporary times. Eastern Visayan/Warayan varieties initially served as Porohanon's substrate with Standard Cebuano features continuing to be overlaid up until the present. This scenario may lead us to consider Porohanon as a kind of mixed language as defined by Muysken (2010) and that it "has not arisen through abrupt splitting or isolation from an ancestral language, but through intense, sustained interaction among different communities via the interconnected seas and channels of Kabisay-an [the Visayas region]" (Santiago, 2024, p. 135).

2.3 Southwestern and Southeastern Mindanao

Southwestern Mindanao (SWM) is a subgroup composed of Blaan (spoken in South Cotabato) (ISO 639-3 [*bpr/bps*]), Tboli (spoken in Davao Occidental) (ISO 639-3 [*tbl*]) and Teduray (spoken in Maguindanao) (ISO 639-3 [*tiy*]), while Southeastern Mindanao (SEM)

is a subgroup composed solely of Klata, spoken in Davao del Sur (ISO 639-3 [*bgi*]) (Zorc, 2019; Zorc et al., 2024). Savage (1986) reconstructed the protolanguage of these four languages, a subgroup he called Proto-South Mindanao. Very little is known about the family, but the atypical features of this subgroup are well-recognized in diachronic literature (Blust, 1991, 1992, 2019; Himmelmann, 2005; Reid, 1982, 2020; Savage, 1986; Schlegel, 1971).

What have been described in the literature as “unique,” “aberrant,” and “anomalous” features of the SWM and SEM languages are found to be features of transition, that is, those that arise as a result of ongoing development (Dumoran, 2025). For these subgroups, the development proceeds from being Philippine-type to being more Indonesian-type.¹²

The pertinent morphosyntactic features of transition in SWM and SEM are presented here in terms of development, namely the simplification of the case-marking paradigms, the loss of aspect marking, and the reduction in the voice systems.

Philippine-type languages have a system of case marking that involves one paradigm for personal nouns, and another paradigm for non-personal nouns or all other types of full nominal expressions. Both paradigms specifically mark: (a) the subject (SUBJ) argument; (b) the

¹²These two types refer to the two main typological classes in western Austronesian languages. The first is Philippine-type, defined by (a) at least a three-way distinction of voices; (b) at least one non-local case marker; and (c) pronominal second position clitics, and (d) other typical co-occurring features such as aspect-mood marking. The second is Indonesian-type, characterized by (a) a two-way voice alternation, (b) the absence of second position clitics, (c) the use of applicative morphology and (d) the integration of proclitic actor markers into the paradigm of voice markers. It is also important to note that Indonesian-type morphosyntax is less typologically homogeneous than Philippine-type.

CORE argument (i.e., the non-subject actor or the object); and (c) the GEN argument. In addition to these, there are also distinct markers for the OBL argument and the LOC argument. Table 4 summarizes the case markers for SWM and SEM common noun phrases.

Table 4. SWM and SEM case markers for nominal phrases

Case Marker	Tboli	Blaan	Teduray	Klata
SUBJ ¹³	<i>yem</i> , Ø	<i>i</i> , Ø	<i>i</i> , Ø	<i>keng</i>
CORE	-	<i>i</i> , Ø	<i>i</i> , Ø	<i>neng</i>
GEN	-	<i>i</i> , Ø	<i>i</i> , Ø	<i>neng</i>
LOC	<i>be</i>	<i>di</i>	<i>dob</i>	<i>ta</i>
OBL	<i>ke</i> , Ø	<i>di</i>	<i>be</i> , Ø	<i>neng</i>

The SWM and SEM languages have overt case markers for the subject argument: this is obligatory in Klata, but may be dropped in Tboli, Blaan, and Teduray. Meanwhile, CORE argument markers are non-existent in Tboli, and are freely omissible in Blaan and Teduray, but are obligatorily overt in Klata. For possessors, Tboli has no overt marking; Blaan and Teduray optionally mark GEN, and Klata obligatorily encodes GEN with an overt case marker. Prominent in this table is the case syncretism in Teduray and Blaan, where SUBJ, CORE, and GEN arguments are marked by the same form. The optional case marking in the SWM languages, as well as the syncretism in all four languages, indicate a development towards the loss of case marking, as is characteristic of Indonesian-type languages.

¹³Unlike Porohanon, which exhibits ergative alignment, SWM and SEM languages show symmetrical voice alignment; to reflect this, SWM and SEM examples are annotated using SUBJ for the subject, and CORE for the non-subject core argument.

In terms of aspectual marking, the SWM and SEM languages deviate significantly when compared with the Philippine-type aspect system. That is, Tboli and Blaan verbs do not carry any temporal morphology (13); and all four languages make no distinction between perfective and imperfective realis aspects. The elicited sentence pair in example (14) confirms this non-distinction in Klata. In diachronic literature, this is described as the loss of aspect marking (Blust, 2019; Reid, 1992).

(13) No temporal marking on the verb in Tboli

a. *Tikong kol Kasi **dmadu** le.* (Porter, 1977, p. 23)

Tikong Ø=*kol* Ø=*Kasi* <**em**>**dadu**=*le*

as.soon.as AV=arrive SUBJ=Kasi <AV>**plow**=3PL.SUBJ

‘When Kasi arrived, they plowed’

b. *Igo Kasi **dmadu** kol Walan* (Porter, 1977, p. 24)

Igo *Kasi* <**em**>**dadu** Ø=*kol* *Walan*

while Kasi <AV>**plow** AV=arrive Walan

‘Walan arrived while Kasi was plowing.’

c. *Ket tau angat **benlay** le.* (Porter, 1977, p. 30)

Ket Ø=*tau* *angat* <**en**>**blay**=*le*

each SUBJ=person FUTURE <PV>**give**=3PL.CORE

‘They will give to each person.’

(14) No temporal marking on the verb in Tboli

a. *Kobbolli nila keng mangga neng pullu.*

Ko-bolli=nila keng=mangga neng=pullu

REAL-buy=3PL.CORE SUBJ=mango OBL=ten

‘They are buying the mango for ten [pesos].’

b. *Kobbolli nila keng mangga neng pullu.*

Ko-bolli=nila keng=mangga neng=pullu

REAL-buy=3PL.CORE SUBJ=mango OBL=ten

‘They bought the mango for ten [pesos].’

Finally, we can also observe a reduction¹⁴ in the voice systems of SWM and SEM, demonstrated by two developments. First, there is no distinct instrumental voice morphology encoded in SWM and SEM verbs. The sentences in (15) exemplify how the languages encode instrumental affect. In these sentences, the subject is the instrument, but the verb carries no dedicated affix to reference this argument, as it would in the actor voice and in the other undergoer voices. In Tboli (15a) and Blaan (15b), the verb is unaffixed. In Teduray (15c) and Klata (15d), the causative *fe-* and *po-*, respectively, are employed to encode instrumental affect. Diachronically, this is described as the loss of instrumental voice.

(15) No distinct marking for instrumental voice in SWM and SEM

a. Tboli: *Bogul Tog ke Was ehek.* (Porter, 1977, p. 108)

Ø=Bogul Tog=Ø ke=Was Ø=ehek

AV=beat Tog=3SG.CORE. OBL=Was SUBJ=planting.stick

‘Tog beat Was with a planting stick.’

¹⁴In his typology of voice systems, Blust (2002) describes four-term voice systems as full focus languages, three-term voice systems as ‘reduced’ focus languages, and two-term voice systems as non-Philippine-type.

- b. Blaan: *Meye **sulat** i nga i lapis gu.*
*Meye Ø=**sulat** i=nga i=lapis=gu*
 want AV=**write** CORE=child SUBJ=pencil=ISG.GEN
 ‘The child wants to write with my pen.’
- c. Teduray: ***Fegabeley** Anahe i kurtaanan.*
***Fe-ga-beley** Ø=Ana=e i-kurta=anan*
 CAUS-NMLZ-**buy** CORE=Ana=VIS SUBJ=money=future
 ‘The money will be used by Ana to buy (something).’
- d. Klata: ***Pokkoles** neng angnga keng lapis ku.*
***Po=koles** neng=angnga keng=lapis=ku*
 CAUS=**write** GEN=child SUBJ=pencil=ISG.GEN
 ‘My pencil was used by the child to write.’

Second, there is further development in Tboli and Blaan, where the morphological structures of the other undergoer voices (i.e., patient and locative) have syncretized. McDonnell and Chen (2022, p. 18) observe that the merger of PV and LV is a common “decay” of western Austronesian voice morphology. These developments result in a two-way voice alternation for Tboli and Blaan (i.e., agentive voice marked by and undergoer voice marked by <en>).

(16) Syncretism of PV and LV morphology in Blaan

a. PV: *Meye **kenbang** i saweng lagi i belek*

*Meye <en>**k**bang i=saweng=lagi i=belek*

want <PV>**pick** CORE=person=male SUBJ=flower

‘The lad wants to pick the flower.’

b. LV: *Meye **enkel** i nga i kwarto*

*Meye **en=kel** i=nga i=kwarto*

want LV=**sweep** CORE=child SUBJ=room

‘The child wants to sweep the room.’

Blust (1992, p. 13) writes that “the often noted ‘aberrant’ character of the South Mindanao languages is most simply explained as a product of their highly innovative nature rather than as a product of long separation from other languages in the Philippines.” In the same paper, Blust (1992) examines the apparent speech strata in Teduray, which refer to distinct layers of native and non-native vocabulary, defined by differing reflexes of a single proto-phoneme, as well as mutually associated paths of linguistic development. Blust (1992) finds that nearly half of all Teduray vocabulary with a known PPH etymology has been borrowed, where majority of the loanwords in the language are traced to the Danaw languages. Some loanwords are also shared by Tboli, which could be the result of parallel borrowing. Aside from the influence of Danaw, lexical evidence also suggests a connection between the South Mindanao languages with Manobo and possibly Subanun languages (Blust, 1992, p. 13).

What has driven such scale of change among the languages? One direction we can take is to consider extra-linguistic perspectives to account for these developments. The ethnohistory of Mindanao and its

indigenous peoples, the *Lumad*,¹⁵ can serve as a backdrop to understand the linguistic development and connections in the region, where we identify two important phases that could have driven language change in the South Mindanao subgroup.

The first phase involved an undocumented contact with an extinct Austronesian language. Blust (1992, p. 34) writes that “both the number of basic vocabulary items borrowed and the lack of a plausible modern source for certain forms suggest that PSM [Proto-South Mindanao] was in intimate and prolonged contact with some other Austronesian language in the southern Philippines which left no modern descendants.” This historical connection with an unknown Austronesian language could have been a likely factor in driving the degree of innovation observable among the South Mindanao languages at present, not only in terms of vocabulary but also in the shift away from a Philippine-type morphosyntax. Indeed, following Thomason and Kaufman’s (1988) framework for language contact, the social contact between the groups would have been intense, resulting in contact-induced grammatical change in the South Mindanao languages.

The second phase involved the rise of two powerful sultanates in Mindanao in the 1500s: the Sultanate of Sulu and the Sultanate of Maguindanao, which oversaw the South Mindanao communities. The Sultanate of Maguindanao forced the *Lumad*, including the Teduray and Tboli people, to pay horrendous taxes. Tax collectors and implementers of the sultanate were *Moro* (Muslims); for the Teduray, these *Moro* collectors were the Iranun. Fines and penalties (life and property) were

¹⁵*Lumad* is a term that refers to the non-Christianized, non-Islamized indigenous peoples of Mindanao, including the Blaan, Tboli, Teduray and Klata.

implemented for missed payments (Rodil, 2017). While the current documentation of the contact between the sultanates and the South Mindanao communities in linguistic literature argues for trade as an important factor, it is clearly unnuanced in light of this documented ethnohistory that involved not just forced payment of taxes, but also slave raiding and warfare. The *Lumad* were allowed to sell their crops only when they paid taxes to the sultanate. Those who revolted retreated into the mountains, delaying the pressures and threats from the sultanate, the Christianization efforts by Spain, and the slave trade that targeted the *Lumad*.

It is clear from the ethnohistory that the rise of the sultanates had a direct impact on the social life of the *Lumad*, and linguistically, this manifested in a more recent layer of contact between the Danaw and South Mindanao languages identified by Blust (1992) and described above. Additionally, this social change would have also erased the prior connections of the South Mindanao communities with other Austronesian communities, burying the traces of language contact under deeper strata.

While more data is needed to support the arguments presented here, this is a fruitful area where we can begin to explore how the unique innovations among the South Mindanao languages have developed. A similar case has been documented by McDonnell (2022) in some languages in Southern Sumatra, which have become more Indonesian-type from having previously more complex systems. Blust (1992, pp. 36–37) also concludes his paper with the same sentiment regarding the importance of investigating the effects of language contact. He cites the work of Pallesen (1985) regarding the linguistic convergence between

Tausug and Sama Bajaw, which also demonstrates massive borrowing across linguistic systems. Further work thus needs to be done, and an integration of various perspectives from the ground would inform the direction of future inquiry.

3 Where do we go from here: Historical and comparative linguistics from below

It has already been widely demonstrated in the literature how language change follows general tendencies or pathways, which are mainly motivated by linguistic factors and constraints, but as we have seen in the previous section, change is not exceptionless, and it is the interaction of different factors, both linguistic and social, that shapes the kinds of outcomes that may arise in a given setting. It goes without saying that linguistic reconstructions, following the Comparative Method, are predicated on the negotiations between top-down and bottom-up (context-dependent) approaches.

In terms of contact-induced change specifically, Curnow (2001, p. 434) writes about the need to consider not only linguistic factors but also socio-political and historical data in understanding a specific contact situation. Section 2 demonstrates how contact phenomena are explained through a mix of perspectives, not only confined within the field of contact linguistics, but also historical linguistics, where the Comparative Method serves as a useful tool to distinguish native and non-native elements in a language.

Taking a wider perspective, data on language change belong to different levels that are distinguished in terms of dimensions of aggregation and time depth, as well as in terms of data sources and sub-disciplines. Table 5 presents these levels of language change, adapted from Muysken (2010, p. 268):¹⁶

Table 5. Layers of aggregation and time depth in studying language change

	Space (aggregate)	Time	Sub-discipline
Macro	Larger areas of the world	Deep time	Areal typology
Meso	Geographical region	Generally 200-1000 years	Historical linguistics
Micro	Community	20-200 years	Sociolinguistics
Person	Individual	0-50 years	Psycholinguistics

The table highlights how wider, macro- and meso-level scenarios that have been invoked in historical linguistics and typology fundamentally rest on micro-level scenarios that are highly contextualized and localized. Understanding the phenomenon of language change is thus informed by what is happening on the ground. The comparanda for linguistic reconstructions, therefore, ideally include linguistic variations and dialectal differences, cognizant of the peculiarities of the languages being compared.

The strength of this integrated approach is its emphasis on linking various perspectives, where “a specific linguistic result is linked to a historical setting, involving specific people (age, ethnicity, mix), with

¹⁶Muysken (2010) focuses specifically on language contact, which is extended here to account for language change more widely.

specific languages, languages interacting following specific scenarios, which are governed by well-defined processing constraints” (Muysken, 2010, p. 271).

Acknowledging such interactions thus allows us to make more nuanced reconstructions of the past (cf. Pakendorf, 2014). The field of historical sociolinguistics (or sociohistorical linguistics), which aims “to investigate and provide an account of the forms/uses in which variation may manifest itself in a given community over time, and of how particular functions, uses and kinds of variation develop within particular languages, speech communities, social groups, networks and individuals” (Romaine, 1982, p. x) highlights the importance of reconstructions that are socially informed.

Linking the interstages, however, is still otherwise underexplored. That is, the question of how linguistic developments transition from the level of the individual, to the community, and to the larger geographic regions, remains a problem in historical linguistics and other related sub-fields. Weinreich et al. (1968) articulate this problem in their seminal paper on the empirical foundations for a theory of language change, and since then, various perspectives and frameworks such as Croft’s (2000) evolutionary framework for language change attempt to further investigate this by considering the interaction of different factors and mechanisms. Ross (1997), moreover, argues for certain kinds of linguistic development (such as the development of innovation-defined and innovation-linked subgroups) linked with specific kinds of speech-community events, involving changes in the strength of ties within the social network of the speakers. There is thus the need for more case studies from a wide variety of contexts, particularly those

from small-scale multilingual ones, in order to have a stronger empirical foundation for the processes and mechanisms governing language change (cf. Stanford, 2016).

To understand the development of Philippine languages, specifically, case studies that provide detailed information regarding the contexts of communities, patterns of language use, ongoing variation, recent outcomes of contact, and reconstructions of lower-order subgroups, may shed new insights on reconstructing the history of the languages at a deeper time depth.

In terms of language contact, a number of works have explored the contact between Philippine and other foreign languages, such as Gonzales (2022) on the Philippine Hokkien variety Lánnang-uè; Alcantara (1999), Baklanova and Bellamy (2023), and Panganiban (1961) on Tagalog and Spanish; Fernández (2011) and Steinkrüger (2006, January 17-20) on the Spanish-based creole Chabacano; and Dita et al. (2022), Lee and Borlongan (2022), and Malicsi (2007), on Philippine English. For contact between genetically related languages, studies are fewer. One recent work is Gallego (2022a, 2022b, 2023), which focuses on the development of Ibatan, largely influenced by Ilocano, a language belonging to a different subgroup (see Section 2.1). Another work is Blust (1992) on the speech strata of Teduray, which also involves layers of language contact (see Section 2.3).

Reconstructions of lower-order Philippine subgroups and languages also inform higher-order reconstructions. Gallego (2014) presents a reconstruction of Proto-Batanic; Dumoran (2025) and Estrera (2024) focus on the history and description of the Southern Mindanao

languages; Barbian (1977) compares the Mangyan languages; and Peneyra (2003) presents an internal reconstruction of Tagalog.

Dialectological studies explore regional variation in languages, looking at language development at a smaller scale. Some recent studies are Javier (2012) on Romblomanon; Cunanan (2015), Hernandez (1998), Usero (2025), and Zubiri (2019) on the Bikol varieties; Añofo (2021), Katigbak (2014), Paz (1994a, 1994b), and Santiago (2013) on the dialects of Tagalog; Cruz et al. (2020) on Kapampangan; and Endriga (2010) and Endriga and Añaves (2023) on Cebuano. Findings from these studies also mention language contact, especially among closely related languages, as an important driver of variation and change.

Finally, detailed descriptions of specific languages are important in understanding language change. Lee et al. (2024) (this issue) detail the developments in the field of language documentation and description in the Philippines. Such in-depth grammatical descriptions, in tandem with ethnographic research on the communities, allow us to identify unique features in the languages, situated within the specific context of the speech communities, providing further information regarding their emergence and persistence. It is also important to note that we are witnessing a move towards a more collaborative praxis in the field, in which the results of the collaboration between the linguist and the community are able to engage with multiple publics, such as historical linguists in this case.

While it is not the intention for the discussion here to be exhaustive, the sample of studies presented above gives us an idea on the available work that can shed light on ongoing questions in the field of Philippine

historical linguistics. We are also able to see the apparent gaps in the literature, such as the lacuna of studies on variationist sociolinguistics, contact between genetically related languages, and dialectological studies on the languages of northern and southern Philippines. Following Klammer (2019) in her study on the linguistic history of Island Southeast Asia, we reiterate the importance of these on-the-ground research that examine synchronic processes of language contact, the interaction of social and linguistic factors to drive change, as well as ongoing dialectal variation. These studies form a patchwork of microhistories that richly inform our picture of linguistic development.

4 Conclusion

An overview of the recent studies on language change in the Philippines and the wider Austronesian region reveals how the field is heading towards more nuanced reconstructions, with greater focus on disentangling layers and scales of change. This paper reiterates a more integrated approach in our linguistic reconstructions that considers views from above and below, and demonstrates the strength of the Comparative Method of traditional historical linguistics if it is used in tandem with modern methodologies and approaches such as those employed in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, language contact, and dialectology, among others.

As a complement to the macro-histories produced by the Comparative Method, a context-dependent approach that investigates micro-histories offers a nuanced perspective in exploring the nature of linguistic relationships, points of dispersal of populations, the agents of

change, and the spread of innovations across speakers. We move away from the “dendromania” of traditional historical linguistics, which focuses on how languages are similar or united under a single tree, and we put equal emphasis on the diversity of structures and contexts that are observed in the languages (Klamer, 2019, pp. 10–11; Smith, 2023, p. 324).

Additionally, more detailed case studies such as those discussed in the previous sections are shown to be central in building a stronger empirical foundation for theories on language change. That is, large-scale modeling studies, which have been the vogue in historical linguistics in recent years, should always be informed by fine-grained studies, in that the causal hypotheses regarding the connections among the variables being examined can be accurately identified and tested.

In sum, what we need to continue for the future of the field are further case studies, fuller documentation of languages, and more in-depth descriptions of the sociolinguistic contexts of the communities. This emphasis for a more localized approach in historical linguistics coincides with the direction proposed for other disciplines similarly focused on culture history. In the field of archaeology, for instance, Barretto-Tesoro and Acabado (2023) argue for an alternative periodization for the history of the Philippines, incorporating indigenous perspectives in chronology building. The proposed periodization is more localized and sensitive to the various contexts of Philippine communities, incorporating folklore and local histories. All in all, the disciplines are heading towards a more integrated approach, highlighting the importance of the view from below. That is, we give due recognition to research on the ground, headed by local scholars and

community members who are cognizant of the prevailing socio-political landscape, ethnohistories, and other external factors in the community that contribute to linguistic development.

5 Glossing abbreviations

I	1st person	NEG	negation
2	2nd person	NMLZ	nominalizer
3	3rd person	NONSPEC	non-specific
ABIL	abilitative	OBLIQUE	oblique
ABS	absolutive	PFV	perfective
AV	actor voice	PL	plural
CAUS	causative	POS	postposed
CEB	Cebuano	POSS	possessive
CONJ	conjunction	PRE	preposed
CORE	core	PRH	Porohanon
DIV	diversity marker	PRT	particle
ERG	ergative	PV	patient voice
EXCL	exclusive	RDP	reduplication
EXIST	existential	REAL	realis
GEN	genitive	REF	referencing marker
ILO	Ilocano	SG	singular
INCL	inclusive	SPEC	specific
INTR	intransitive	STAT	stative
IPFV	imperfective	SUBJ	subject
LNK	linker	TR	transitive
LOC	locative	UV	undergoer voice
LV	locative voice	VIS	visible

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