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## Tagalog and the Question of Being

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## Tagalog and the Question of Being

LEONARDO R. SILOS

"There is need to say and think that being is," Heidegger quotes Parmenides, a Pre-Socratic philosopher. He continues:

One might say that this statement is obviously commonplace. What else could one say and think of being except that it is. The statement is not only self-evident. It really says nothing. What it says we already know.<sup>1</sup>

Heidegger of course does not think so, for he goes on for another seventy pages to "step back" into the dimension in which the subject matter of thought emerges and out of which the saying of Parmenides came to expression.

The need to say and think that being is may indeed appear strange. But what should be stranger to us is that our national language does not include "being" in its vocabulary. The quotation from a Greek philosopher by a contemporary philosopher serves to show that from the birth of Western philosophy some 2,500 years ago to this day, philosophers have been talking of being. Presumably they have not exhausted, not to say been exhausted, thinking being. Tagalog, however, has not even begun to say "being."

It is this absence of being in our national language which we shall inquire into. Firstly, we shall ask the grammarians what they have to say on the subject. This first part shall serve to: (1) document the absence; (2) clarify the nature of this absence by examining the different Tagalog words which are said to "fill in" for the verb to-be; (3) examine the opposite word, non-being. Secondly, we shall inquire into the significance of this absence and relate it to the question of being. In this second part we shall essay, necessarily, an interpretation. That a philosophical interpretation is at all called for is premised on this, that Tagalog as a language is not

1. Martin Heidegger, *Was Heisst Denken?* (Tübingen: Niemayer, 1955), pp. 105-6.

only a linguistic tradition but a tradition of the spirit as well, linking us to a very distant past not only in its language but in its thought. It reveals to us not only how our ancestors spoke but how they thought. The structures of the language are therefore of interest not only to the linguist and grammarian, but to the philosopher also. In the absence of any ancient Tagalog literary tradition, the language is our only literary link to that ancient past. If then this essay succeeds somehow to raise new questions for the students of the language and to expose new veins for exploration, it shall have served its purpose.

We also wish to point out that although we shall sometimes use the terminology and the problematic of Heidegger, we do not wish to imply that our argument represents his thinking. Indeed the points of contact may be purely tangential. Our purpose is less pretentious. We shall use Heidegger's thought as the *locus* to insert our inquiry within the contemporary discussion. For more than any other philosopher, it is Heidegger who has thematized the questions of being and language in their unity.

#### THE ABSENCE OF "TO BE" IN TAGALOG

Grammarians have noted the absence of the word to-be in Tagalog. But having noted it, they have shied away from facing the question squarely. Instead they have tended to explain it away by resorting to the idea of "tacit" inclusion and by pointing out "substitute" words. But somehow that question must be faced. For is it not in itself remarkable that being should always be implied and never expressly said? The noted Tagalog scholar, Pedro Serrano Laktaw, writes in his *Estudios Gramaticales*:

The Spanish substantive verb *ser* has no specific translation in Tagalog because it is already *tacitly expressed* in the very parts of the sentence, and thus one says simply:

- |                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Mabuting tao si Juan.       | : Juan <i>is</i> a good man.                |
| Masamang pagkain iyan.      | : That <i>is</i> bad food.                  |
| Sinungaling ang batang ito. | : This child <i>is</i> a liar. <sup>2</sup> |

The choice of examples may not seem felicitous as someone could invert the sentence structure and behold, what was "tacitly

2. Pedro Serrano Laktaw, *Estudios Gramaticales sobre la Lengua Tagalog*, Obra Postuma (Manila: Juan Fajardo, 1929), p. 73.

expressed" has become explicit: "Si Juan *ay* mabuting tao." However, the author has concluded earlier in the book that *ay* is not the equivalent of the Spanish *ser* because *ay* has no equivalent in Spanish: "it is an idiom peculiar to Tagalog."<sup>3</sup> We shall return to this question later.

The much older book of Totanes, one of whose editions was used by Wilhelm von Humboldt as a basis for his study of Tagalog, puts the matter thus:

There is properly no *sum, es, fuit* (I am, you are, he has been) in this language, but it compensates for the lack in all the meanings of the verb which are three. The first, *ser, no ser*; the second, *estar, no estar*; the third, *haber o tener, no haber o no tener*.<sup>4</sup>

An even older book states:

This language does not have the verb *sum, es, fui*; but it compensates for the lack according to the different meanings of the verb.<sup>5</sup>

This absence pointed out by grammarians is not merely relative to the conjugation of the verb, as someone might think because of the manner the problem is stated (*sum, es, fui*). Firstly, the *sum-es-fui* are used not to show conjugation directly but to show the principal stems of the verb. Secondly, the language is said to compensate not for the conjugated forms but for the different meanings of the verb. Lastly, these grammar books use *sum* because the Spanish does not have one word but four to cover all the meanings of *sum*, namely, *ser, estar, haber or tener*.

#### BEING AND NA, NAROON, NASA KALAGAYAN

A more familiar author, Jose Rizal, distinguishes two usages of *ser* in his own *Estudios*:

The substantive verb *ser* taken as a copula is simply represented in Tagalog by the atonic copulative particle *ay*. In its other usage, such as *to exist*, it has equivalents which we shall see immediately.

The verb *estar* is represented by the word *na* tonic, as distinguished from the linking particle *na* atonic. *Naroon*, is there; *narian*, is there; *nani*, is here. The tonic accent of this word is so strong that it absorbs what-

3. *Ibid.*

4. Sebastian de Totanes, *Arte de la Lengua Tagala y Manual Tagalog* (Manila, 1865), p. 21. The first edition appeared in 1745.

5. Thomas Ortiz, *Artes y Reglas de la Lengua Tagala* (Manila, 1740), p. 69.

ever follows it, forming thereafter a single word with it.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, Rizal switches from *ser* to *estar*. True enough, his equivalents are of *estar* not *ser*. Laktaw also discusses *na* under *estar*. ‘*Estar* in its signification of *being in a certain place* is equivalent to the Tagalog *na*.’<sup>7</sup> He gives examples and to cite a couple:

- |                               |                                    |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Na sa bahay ang libro.</i> | : The book <i>is</i> in the house. |
| <i>Na sa akin.</i>            | : It <i>is</i> with me.            |

Laktaw also observes with Rizal that when joined with adverbs of place, *na* forms a single “diction” with them:

- |                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <i>Nasaan ang kapatid mo?</i> | : <i>Where is</i> your brother (sister)? |
| <i>Narini siya.</i>           | : He (she) <i>is here</i> .              |

*Na* thus connotes place, while to-be as in “I am” does not. This distinction between to-be and to-be-in-a-place may not be discernible in English because it employs the same verb to express both, “I am” and “I am here.” The Spanish, however, recognizes the distinction by having two words, distinct in both usage and form, *ser* and *estar*.<sup>8</sup>

The Tagalog translation of Rizal’s passages above does not translate *ser* into Tagalog but it does translate *to exist*: *masakalagayan* / *nasakalagayan?/.*<sup>9</sup> Although this Tagalog word might perhaps serve in certain applications, it is not the word we are looking for. This may be quickly decided by using the word to translate Hamlet’s “to be or not to be,” or the equally famous Cartesian *cogito-sum*.

- |                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>To be or not to be.</i>     | : Nasakalagayan o wala sa kalagayan.      |
| <i>I think therefore I am.</i> | : Ako'y umiisip kaya ako'y nasakalagayan. |

6. In the bilingual edition, *Ang Balarila ni Rizal*, tinagalog ni Cecilio Lopez (Manila: Benipayo Press, 1962), p. 19.

7. Laktaw, *Estudios Gramaticales*, 74. The switch by Rizal from *ser* to *estar* may explain the noticeable hesitation of the Tagalog translation of these passages of Rizal in the bilingual editor (*Ang Balarila*, p. 52). Thus, “que se veran inmediatamente” which we have translated “which we shall see immediately” is translated in Tagalog “iuulat natin sa dakong huli.” There is, however, in these *Estudios* of Rizal, no “dakong huli” (last section) where Rizal gives equivalents of *ser* as *existir*. The only possible equivalents are those mentioned in the immediately following paragraph. It was to avoid such a predicament as this that the Spanish grammar books on Tagalog used *sum-es-fui*. For *estar* also represents *sum* but not *ser*.

8. *Estar* has, of course, wider application than *na* which is relative to a place; *estar* has reference also to a situation, condition or actual manner of being.

9. Rizal, *Ang Balarila*, p. 52.

In neither case do we hear the same meaning in the Tagalog as in the English.

As a final observation on *na*, let us again quote Rizal:

Like the verb *estar*, *na* is a verb essentially of the present, an *actual* verb, so to speak, and since the past or the future is a negation of the present, of actuality, the Tagalog has only the present form of this verb.<sup>10</sup>

What Rizal is interpreting and giving a deeper significance to is the fact that this word *na* is not conjugated. It retains the same form in any tense, number or person. This brings us back to *ay* which some – indeed most, probably all – school grammar books classify under the *pandiwang walang banghay*, verbs without conjugation.

#### BEING AND AY

Both Rizal and Laktaw distinguish *ay* from *ser* taken as *existir*. But Rizal seems to say that *ay* corresponds to the Spanish *ser* at least as a *linking* verb. What Rizal actually says deserves a closer look.

El verbo sustantivo *ser* en su acepción de cópula está sencillamente representado en tagálog por la partícula copulativa atónica *ay*.

He does not say “verbo” but “particula.” *Ay* represents *ser* in its *linking* function. Whether *ay* is a verb, even in Rizal’s mind, thus remains an open question.

Laktaw, however, is quite explicit. After discussing the various uses of *ay* which he calls a *ligazón* (link) or *puente* (bridge) which connects a word or phrases with another, he concludes: “This *ay* has no equivalent in Spanish, it is an idiom peculiar to Tagalog.”<sup>11</sup>

But is not *ay* equivalent to the auxiliary verb to-be? For instance:

Siya *ay* kumakain ng laing. : He *is* eating laing.

Does not *ay* in this sentence function as the auxiliary verb to-be? The answer lies in the usage itself. The English distinguishes “He is eating” from “He eats” as having two distinct verb forms with different shades of meaning. On the other hand, the same Tagalog sentence can be translated by either English verb form in their different meanings:

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

11. Laktaw, *Estudios Gramaticales*, p. 73.

Siya ay kumakain ng laing. : He is eating laing.  
He eats laing.

That is not the whole story. We can eliminate *ay* by inversion and the meaning suffers no change:

Kumakain siya ng laing. : He is eating laing.  
He eats laing.

In these instances, *ay* is not the auxiliary verb to-be because: (1) where *ay* is employed, the statement can be correctly translated "He eats laing"; and (2) where it is translated "He is eating laing," the *ay* may not be present at all. Now an auxiliary verb is precisely auxiliary by its presence, its employment as such. How can it be auxiliary if it quits its post? By its own grammar, one cannot say in English "He eating laing" and explain that the auxiliary verb that is not there, is nevertheless understood implicitly.

Let us catalogue a few more "oddities" of *ay*, which also show why *ay* is not the linking verb to-be. "Narini siya" means "He is here." But how does one translate "Sya ay narini," if *ay* is the linking verb to-be?

Narini siya.	: He is here.
Sya ay narini.	: He is is-here (?) He is being-here (?)

Or again, *may* (*mayroon*) has different translations in English.

<i>Mayroon</i> tao sa pintuan.	: <i>There is</i> somebody at the door.
<i>May</i> pagkain si Juan.	: Juan <i>has</i> food.

But how does one translate:

Sa pintua'y may tao.	: At the door is there-is somebody (?)
Si Juan ay may pagkain.	: Juan is has-food (?) Juan is having-food (?)

How about: "Juan is one having food"? Aside from the fact that it does not translate the Tagalog, this circumlocution is forced on one if it is assumed that *ay* is the linking verb to-be. Moreover, Tagalog has an equivalent of such a circumlocution and it uses *ang*: "Si Juan *ang* may pagkain."

Finally, we observe that *ay* has no negative form. What is negated is not the *ay* but the comment or predicate. This is another peculiarity which distinguishes *ay* from the verb to-be. The function of *ay* remains exactly the same in a positive or negative statement.

### THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT *AY*

How do we explain these idiosyncracies? We ask: how did the problem arise in the first place? Have we by any chance been trying to make one syntax conform to an alien one? Have we not been trying to make one language speak in another? Perhaps we are now more inclined to agree with Laktaw that *ay* is “un modismo exclusivo del tagalog.” But if *ay* is not the verb to-be meaning “to exist,” if it is not the auxiliary verb to-be, or the linking verb to-be, in fact is not a verb at all, what is it? It is called a particle, *pangatnig*, with a purely linking function. Leonard Bloomfield calls it a “marker” or “sign” of predication.<sup>12</sup>

There is a passage in the *Balarila* published during the period of the Commonwealth by the National Language Institute which is worth quoting at length for its singular honesty in assessing the problem about *ay*. After the initial statement that “strictly speaking, *ay* is not a real verb but a particle whose true function is to link,” it concludes in this manner:

These various ways of changing the expression by which *ay* is omitted to the point that it is entirely eliminated, indicate that the status of *ay* as a verb is not firmly established and final. But nevertheless, we cannot entirely deny to *ay* the function of verb, especially if we consider that it is the only equivalent of the so-called substantive verb “to be” in English and *verbo substantivo ser* in Spanish, which to this day serve, however that may be, as the basis and model for Pilipino grammar.

Whence on top of its use as a mere linking or connecting particle, *ay* cannot be denied its role as a verb, if only to follow the rules of speech according to experts and foreign languages.

Out of respect for this, it is right that we classify *ay* among the quasi-verbs or among the auxiliary verbs whose forms remain unchanged in all numbers, tenses, and persons, thus not requiring conjugation.<sup>13</sup>

12. Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (New York: Henry Holt, 1933), for instance, pp. 201, 244. See also Teresita Ramos, *Tagalog Structures* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1975), pp. 116-17: “Observe how *ay* separates or divides the topic from the comment. This ligature occurs right after the topic of the sentence. This is why *ay* is sometimes called a comment or predicate marker.” However, whether this description of *ay* as a predicate marker adequately covers its functions may be questioned by such a construction as: “Kahapon ay pumarito sila” (they came yesterday).

13. *Balarila Ng Wikang Pambansa* (Manila: Kawanihan ng Palimbagan, 1940), p. 247: “Ang mga ganitóng paraán ng pag-iiba-ibáng pahayag na ikinawalâ ng *ay*, hanggang lúbusang pagkawalâ, ay máikapagsasabi ng ngang hindî gaanong matatág at ganáp ang pagkapandiwâ ng *ay*. Subali’t di dahil dito’y maaari nang walín ang buóng kabuluhán ng *ay* sa tungkuling pandiwâ, lalò na’t áalagataíng itó ang tanging katum-

The Commonwealth *Balarila* thus opted, albeit reluctantly, for a compromise: *ay* is a quasi-verb or auxiliary verb. We observe, however, that the *Balarila* made the why of the compromise quite clear and it was for reasons not intrinsic to the language. It was (1) out of respect for the rules of speech according to “experts and foreign languages” and (2) because *ay* is the only equivalent of the English “to be” and the Spanish *ser*. The first reason is quite extrinsic to the language and is not among the canons of grammar or syntax. Indeed, normally experts study how the language is spoken and do not prescribe rules for the language but derive these from the usage. The second reason begs the question.

The grammar book of 1740 referred to earlier, already mentions a controversy about *ay*:

There is a controversy whether *ay*, besides its other functions, can also fill in for the verb *sum, es, fui*. Some affirm, others deny. But it seems that it cannot be denied that often it fills in for the verb, if not in everything, at least partially. V.g. Si Pedro ay magaling. Pedro is good.<sup>14</sup>

This “at least partially” is not a precursor of the quasi-verb. It means that *ay* fills in for the verb *sum*, if not in all its meanings, at least in some. As to the controversy, we recall that the premise was “this language does not have the verb *sum, es, fui*.” But if the language does not have the verb, what was the controversy about *ay*? It was whether *ay* could be a stand in for *sum* in some of its meanings and functions, and if not in all the instances of *ay*, at least in some. How such a controversy could arise, we have already seen. Because *ay* and the “being” copula both have a linking function, they would appear to coincide in some instances, just as analogically the wheel and the sled coincide in certain functions, although the two are distinct and remain distinct. But more fundamentally, *ay* is not the verb to-be, and a language that does not have such an *ay* would have no points of reference by which to fix

bás ng mga tinatawag at ginagamit na *substantive verb* “to be” sa Inglés, at *verbo substantivo* “ser” sa Kastilà, na siyáng paanu’t-paanumá'y batayán at tularán hanggá ngayón ng balarilang pilipino.

“Sa ibabaw ngā ng pagka-pangatníg o pagka-pang-angkóp lamang ng *ay*, ay di má-ikakaít ang kanyáng panunúparan sa tungkuling pandiwà, alinsunod man lamang sa mga tuntunin ng pangungusap sa mga bihasá’t banyagang wikà.

“Alang-alang dito’y may karapatán ang *ay* na mápabilang sa mga malapandiwa o sa mga pantulong na pandiwà, na ang anyó ay df nababago sa lahát ng panagano, panahón, panauhan at kailanán; kayá walâ nang kailangan pang banghayín.”

14. Ortiz, *Artes y Reglas*, p. 70.

its nature. *Ay* would be definable within its own speech system and any attempt to explain it within an alien system would inevitably lead to controversy.

#### BEING AND MAY (MAYROON)

*May* (*mayroon*) is sometimes classified as an existential verb.<sup>15</sup> This is because it can be translated in English by the impersonal “there is.” We observe, however, that while English uses the verb to-be, the Spanish idiom uses *haber*, the French uses *avoir*, the German uses *geben*.

*Mayroon* tao sa pintuan.

*There is* somebody at the door.

*Hay* gente a la puerta.

*Il y a* quelqu'un à la porte.

*Es gibt* jemanden an der Tür.

Since *may* (*mayroon*) also means “to have,” we can see that the Tagalog idiom is closer to the Spanish and the French than to the English. Secondly, we notice the affinity of *mayroon* with *naroon*: both connote place. It may also be pointed out that this is true of the English (*there is*) and the French (*il y a*).

#### BEING AND NGA, PALA, HINDI

Finally, Laktaw lists a set of words which stand for the verb *ser* or *no ser*.<sup>16</sup> For the negatives, he lists *di*, *dili*, *hindi*, *di isa man*.

*Di* iyan. : That is *not* it.

*Dili* ito ang hinihingi ko. : This is *not* what I'm asking for.

*Hindi* maigi ito. : This is *not* good.

Whether these negatives are the negatives of the existential to-be can be decided by its usage. *Hindi ako* does not mean “I don't exist” but “I am not he,” or “It is not I,” and is a response and implies a prior question or discourse.

For the affirmatives, Laktaw mentions *din*, *nga*, *ngani*, *pala*.

*Sino* ang naparito kahapon? : Who came yesterday?

*Ako rin po.* : It was I, sir.

*Ikaw baga ang anak ni Juan?* : Are you then the son of Juan?

*Ako ngani po.* : I am he, sir.

*Aba, siya nga, ikaw pala.* : Oh, it's true, it is you.

15. For example, in *Tagalog for Beginners* by Teresita Ramos and Videña de Guzman (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1978), pp. 250ff.

16. Laktaw, *Estudios Gramaticales*, p. 74.

These words then stand for to-be or not-to-be in the sense that they affirm or deny, agree or disagree with what has been asked, stated or done. In another section of the book, *nga*, *hindi nga* are classified among adverbs of affirmation or negation with *oo*, *totoo*, and the like.<sup>17</sup> The author observes how with laconic elegance such words embrace and gather together the prior discourse however long and then affirm or deny it very tersely: *oo nga*, *siya nga*, *hindi nga*. But they are not the verb to-be. *Siya nga* does not mean "he is" but is an idiomatic expression for "Yes, it's true." *Ako nga* does not mean "I am" but "Yes, I am he," or "Yes, it is I." These *nga* words, affirmative and negative, are essentially a response. They affirm or deny, agree or disagree, assent or dissent, relative to some prior discourse.

#### NON-BEING AND WALA

While Tagalog has no word for being, it has a word for nothing: *wala*. The negative import of the word is familiar to us. It is the negative form of *may* (*mayroon*), *narini*, *naroon*, *narian* or simply *na*.

<i>May laruan ang bata.</i>	: : The child <i>has</i> a toy.
<i>Walang laruan ang bata.</i>	: The child <i>does not have</i> a toy.
<i>May tao sa bahay.</i>	: <i>There is</i> somebody at home.
<i>Walang tao sa bahay.</i>	: <i>There isn't</i> anybody at home.
<i>Narito sila.</i>	: They <i>are here</i> .
<i>Wala sila.</i>	: They <i>aren't here</i> .

Besides these negative forms *wala* has other uses also.

- Walin* ang kabuluhan... : Deny the value...  
*Walin* mo na ang utang ko sa iyo.: Free me from my debt to you.

When joined with affixes, *wala* acquires a variety of meanings, rooted nevertheless in the negative aspect of the word.

*Kawalan*, nothingness; *iwala*, to lose; *makawala*, to escape; *mawala*, to disappear; *pawalan*, to let loose...

In combination with other words, *wala* has almost endless possibilities:

*Walang-bisa*, ineffective; *walang-kinabukasan*, without a future; *walang-*

17. Ibid., pp. 312ff.

*hanggan*, without end; *walang-hiya*, shameless; *walang-pinagaralan*, without manners...

*Wala* has also some not so familiar usages.

*Uala* is sometimes used as a substantive for “gulf,” “sea,” “main,” and may also be made a verb in this signification:

Put to the open sea.	: Mauala ca.
He carried his rapine into the sea.	: Nagpaulala siya nang canyang samsamin. <sup>18</sup>

According to Panganiban, *wala* as “gulf,” “high seas,” is Old Tagalog.<sup>19</sup> The source of both authors may have been the *Vocabulario* of Noceda and Sanlucar: “*Uala*. Golfo, alta mar, *Pauala ca*, engol-fate.”<sup>20</sup> This usage appears to be derivative. How *wala* of familiar negative usage came to mean “gulf,” “sea,” we are not told. However, the following more modern lines from Tayabas (Quezon) may give us a clue:

Tabi ng laot; ibayo ng kalagitnaan ng dagat. Ang bapor ay halos na sa *wala*.<sup>21</sup>

*Wala* as used here is given the meaning: “seeming edge of mid-sea or mid-ocean; horizon.” Perhaps better still: “beyond the edge,” “beyond the horizon,” as the lines describe a progression, near the shore, then beyond the midsea, finally the steamship is almost beyond the horizon. These lines shed some light on the derivation of “high seas” from the negative import of *wala*. The horizon is where the sky and the sea meet, the limit of our field of vision, beyond which is the unknown, the unseen, nothing, *wala*. To put to sea is thus to disappear, to get lost beyond the horizon, *mawala*.

An even more interesting derivative is entered by the *Vocabulario*: “*Napauala*, go over there; *Ipauala*, what one brings with him.

18. Constantino Lendoyro, *The Tagalog Language* (Manila: Juan Fajardo, 1909), p. 306.

19. Jose Villa Panganiban, *Talahulugang Pilipino-Ingles* (Manila: Kawanihan Ng Palimbagan, 1966), under *Wala*: “(OTg) n., gulf, high seas. Syn. Laot, kalautan; now lawa, lawaan: lagoon, lake.”

20. Juan de Noceda and Pedro de Sanlucar, *Vocabulario de la Lengua Tagala* (Manila: Ramirez y Giraudier, ed. 1860). The first edition appeared in 1754.

21. E. Arsenio Manuel, *A Lexicographic Study of Tayabas Tagalog of Quezon Province* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1971), under *wala*. This study shows how much fundamental and basic research remains to be done in Tagalog. The author concludes among others that he was able to find 3,336 word bases and terms in Tayabas Tagalog not recorded in Pedro Serrano Laktaw's *Diccionario Tagalog-Hispano* (1914).

Synonym: *Tiuala*." What is interesting is the synonym. Under *Tiuala*, the *Vocabulario* gives the familiar meanings, "trust," "confidence," "caretaker," but also these entries:

*Tiuala*. Distant part, as the gulf in relation to the shore; *Magtiuala*, to put to sea, or to go far away; *Ipatiuala*, what one brings with him.

If what we have said is correct, that *wala* as "sea" is derived from the negative *wala*, then the same must be said of *tiuala*.<sup>22</sup>

All these usages of *wala* then either have a negative import or derive from the negative *wala*. In the negative, *wala* usually means "absent," "nobody," "nothing."

#### SUMMARY

For our purposes, we end here our search for a Tagalog word for being as being. There does not seem to be any. One can argue to the "existential" character of some words. Being is co-expressed in to-be-in-a-place or in there-is. That may be true. But for all that, we have not progressed in our search for a Tagalog "am" as in "I am." What our search has brought to light instead is the peculiar phenomenon of *ay* as a pure link which somehow refuses to be subsumed under the verb to-be in any of its verbal functions or meanings. When by inversion a proposition omits *ay*, what is understood implicitly is not the "being" copula but *ay*. Further-

22. Although *wala* is rich material for research, unfortunately we have found no monograph on it. For instance, an intriguing point: *wala* is traced to *wada* (Proto-Austronesian): "present, existent; no; none; non-existent." Contradictory meanings from the same word. In Malay, *ada* means "there is, present." Even in our other Philippine languages this "coincidence of opposites" can be found, for instance, Bicolano: *igwa*, "there is"; *wara*, "there is none"; Iloano, *adda*, *wada*, "there is". In Tagalog, however, *wala* is pronouncedly negative in meaning. That *wala* as "gulf" is the same word as *wala* meaning "nothing" is taken for granted by Lendoyro and implied by the *Vocabulario* of Noceda and Sanlucar. Although *tiwala* carries a different accent (penultimate) than *wala* (ultimate), this by itself does not argue to different roots, v.g. *búhay* and *buháy*, *bútas* and *butás*, etc. But if *tiwala* is from *wala*, what is the *ti*? It is not among the regular affixes. Is *tiwala* a combination of two words? In any case, the derivation of diverse meanings from an original signification of a term is well known in language formation. H.K. Brugsch, *Religion und Mythologie der alten Agypter* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1888), p. 53: "In ancient Egyptian the word *kod* designates successively the most diverse concepts: to make pots, to be a potter, to form, create, build, work, draw, navigate, travel, sleep; and substantively: likewise, image, metaphor, similarity, circle, ring. The original representation, "to turn around, to turn in a circle," underlies all those and similar derivatives. The turning of the potter's wheel evoked the representation of the potter's formative activity, out of which grew the significations "form, create, build, work".". Cited in Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1; *Language* (New Haven: University Press, 1965), p. 288, n. 10.

more, words that are said to “stand in” for being such as *naroon* and *mayroon*, do so only in the sense of the Spanish *estar* in its signification of being-in-a-place and of the impersonal there-is. We have also observed how even *mayroon* always, however vaguely, locates being in a place. Being is being somewhere. The *nga* words, on the other hand, are substitute words for being only in that they affirm or deny that something is or is not. They are also essentially a response to some prior questions or discourse. Finally, if the language has no word for being, it does have a word for nothing.

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE QUESTION OF BEING

What then is the significance of all this to the question of being? Heidegger talks of language as the house of being: in its home man dwells.<sup>23</sup> But presumably not in the *wikang pambansa*. There is no epiphany of being there. We have searched and found not being but nothing. Contrary to Parmenides, this language has found no need to utter the word *being*. Nevertheless, Heidegger has given us a lead and this we shall now follow.

Students of language speak of the psychology of a language. Cecilio Lopez, who has been called “the father of Philippine linguistics,” writes:

Every language has two aspects: (1) the morphology and (2) the psychology. . . . Morphologically, every language is a sum total of sound phenomena which are produced physiologically and likewise perceived physiologically. . . Psychologically, every language is a communication of the content of one's experience and at the same time a perception and understanding of the same.<sup>24</sup>

The psychology of language spoken of here refers to the meanings and significations as opposed to the mere sound of words and speech. Language then would be the communication of meaning through articulated sounds. The author cautions that while the two aspects are distinct they are not to be considered as separate but in their relation to each other.

Rizal probes deeper into the historic dimensions of language

23. In *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959), p. 166: “Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins”; p. 159: “Wenn es wahr ist, dass der Mensch den eigentlichen Aufenthalt seines Daseins in der Sprache hat. . .”

24. *Selected Writings of Cecilio Lopez in Philippine Linguistics*, ed. Ernesto Constantino (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1977), pp. 106, 108.

when he says through one of his characters in *El Filibusterismo*: "Language is the thought of the people."<sup>25</sup> Language is the horizon within whose ambit is woven the matrix and levels of meanings which mediate the world and by which a people commonly understand their world. We are normally unaware of this mediation until a rent on the screen makes known its presence. As when the spell is broken by a flaw in the dramatic performance, we suddenly become aware of ourselves in the theatre and the people and things around us: in that brief instant we catch sight of the *world* of make-believe in which we were. In like manner, we catch a glimpse of the mediated character of our world when we encounter a different culture or even a subculture within our own. Then perhaps we say that we are in a different world altogether, for apparently things do not *mean* the same here as in our own.

But the saying of Rizal bears still another interpretation, namely, that the language itself has something to say. Heidegger speaks of "stepping back" in order to recover the primal encounter with being *behind* the "conceptual" and "representational" thinking which is said to characterize the whole history of Western philosophy. There are two paths he takes. The first is by tracing the history of a word of philosophical significance, its etymology, even its sounds, until the subject matter of thought emerges to encounter us.<sup>26</sup> The second path consists in a dialogue with poets whose fundamental inspiration, Heidegger believes, is identical with that of the philosopher:

The poems composed by every great poet are attempts to put into words one single poem. His greatness depends on the extent to which he has entrusted himself to this unique poem, for it is this which enables him to maintain the purity of his poetic utterances by keeping them within the ambit of their single origin. This unique poem in a poet remains unuttered. None of the individual poems, nor all of them together, say everything. And yet each poem speaks out of this unique uncomposed poem and each time says what is the same.<sup>27</sup>

We shall however take neither path. We shall ask neither poet

25. Jose Rizal, *El Filibusterismo* (Manila: Comision Nacional del Centenario de Jose Rizal, 1961), p. 48: "El idioma es el pensamiento de los pueblos."

26. For example, on the etymology of *sein* see M. Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953). See also J.L. Mehta, *Martin Heidegger: The Way and the Vision* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976), pp. 417ff.

27. Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, pp. 37-38. The English quotation is taken from J.L. Mehta, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 3.

nor philosopher whereof he speaks. Rather we shall ask the language itself. For every language bears in its bosom a legacy, that original chemistry between man and his world which came to expression in itself. Language is itself a hermeneutic of that which is. The language itself shall speak of that which it has not uttered: being.

#### THIN KING AND ASSENTING

We must now relate the results of our inquiry in the first part of our essay to the question of being. Here we must speak of the proposition and the judgment.<sup>28</sup> Firstly, we must distinguish two mental attitudes with regard to the proposition, the one of thought and the one of assent. For instance, the proposition "Laing is a Bicol food" is to a foreigner who has no idea what "laing" or for that matter what "Bicol" is, something he can parrot but cannot assent to. Even after he has learned that *laing* is a fish-and-vegetable-cooked-in-coconut-milk dish, and that Bicol is a region in Southern Luzon, that is, even after he is able to make some sense of the proposition, he may still be unable to affirm or deny it, not being able to verify it. A Bicolano, on the other hand, not merely understands the proposition but he assents to it. The proposition as thought of must therefore be distinguished from the proposition as assented to. Over and above the synthesis of the proposition there must be a positing of the synthesis.

Secondly, this positing of the synthesis, this assent to a proposition, is what we properly call the judgment. While we are merely considering, thinking of, reflecting on a proposition, we have not yet affirmed or denied it, we have not yet said yes or no, we have not yet made a judgment.

Thirdly, it is on this level of the judgment that we speak of truth and falsity. And just as it is on this level that truth emerges, so it is on this level that being is encountered. It is here that we know the real. For as long as I have not made a judgment, I have not said anything true or false, I have not affirmed that something is or is not.

Fourthly, that which is revealed in the judgment is not a *what*.

28. Here we refer the reader to Bernard Lonergan: *Insight, A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1958). On the judgment and proposition see chapters 9-10, on which our brief discussion is dependent.

It is not the term that is intended by the question "what it is," but by the question "whether it is." The encounter with being in the judgment is not with the *ti estin*, "what is," but with the *oti estin*, "that is," a distinction that goes back to Aristotle.

Now these two levels of *thinking* and *assenting* find a corresponding structure in the language. The first level of considering, reflecting, thinking, corresponds to what we shall call the *ay*-proposition level, or simply *ay*-level. The second judgmental posture by which we commit ourselves and take a position with regard to a proposition corresponds to the *nga*-level, where one assents or dissents, agrees or disagrees, affirms or denies.

#### AY-PROPOSITIONS

About the *ay*-proposition we observe first of all that all propositions in Tagalog are *ay*-propositions, that is, any proposition in Tagalog can be converted into an *ay*-proposition. What appear as exceptions are either not what we call propositions (declarative sentences) but interrogatory, optative, imperative or exclamatory sentences; or they are abbreviated structures. Secondly, this *ay* linking particle is not found at the beginning or at the end of a proposition. What may be found at the beginning or end is the interjection *ay*. The linking particle is always found in-between words or phrases, which serves to underline again its purely linking function.

*Ay*, as we have argued, is not the verb to-be. Whence, the synthesis achieved by *ay* does not pre-judge the *is*-ness of the proposition. *Ay* serves as a built-in mechanism of the language by which it unites into a synthesis without positing it. *Ay* remains non-committal. Although the two mental attitudes of merely considering and agreeing must be distinguished even in a language which uses the verb to-be as copula, the use of the "being"-copula results in ambivalence. Cassirer describes this ambivalence as the "appreciable difference between even the most comprehensive expression of mere *existence* and "to be" as an expression of purely predicative synthesis."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Western philosophy has had to struggle with this ambivalence, from the Eleatic philosophers down to modern times.

29. Cassirer, *Language*, p. 315.

Even after Kant's critique of the ontological proof, Fichte found it necessary to point explicitly to the difference between predicative and absolute being. In his *Foundations to General Scientific Theory* he postulated the proposition *A is A* as the first principle of all philosophy, and added that this proposition, in which the "is" has the sole signification of a logical copula, says nothing whatsoever regarding the existence or nonexistence of A. "Being" postulated without a predicate, he went on, expresses something entirely different from "being" with a predicate: the proposition "*A is A*" asserts only that if A is, then A is; but it does not so much as raise the question of whether A truly is.<sup>30</sup>

Just how ambivalent is this little word "is" can be seen in this very passage. For even "being" postulated without a predicate can be a mere object of thought, which is precisely at the root of the ontological proof of the existence of God. Much earlier than Kant, Aquinas had already pointed out its fallacy.

*Ay*, as we have argued, expresses this linking function without the ambivalence as a structure of the language. Thus, even in Tagalog, we normally affirm what we say. Nevertheless, the *ay* is non-committal functionally, achieving synthesis without positing it. The *ay* proposition corresponds to the level of reflecting, thinking, considering. It is the proposition as *thought*.

#### NGA-PROPOSITIONS

The *nga*-level, on the other hand, corresponds to the mental attitude of agreeing or disagreeing, affirming or denying, saying yes or no to a proposition. Such words as *oo nga*, *siya nga*, *totoo nga*, *hindi nga*, and the like belong to this *nga*-level. Grammarians call these adverbs. From a purely grammatical point of view, this adverbial character points to their function as modifiers, which in turn points to their relative character. In actual usage, these *nga* words are not used absolutely but always with reference to a proposition, question, action, event, etc. They affirm or deny. In short, they *exteriorize* the mental agreement or disagreement. In relation to the proposition, the *nga* posits what the *ay* has synthesized. Because of this nature of *ay*, the *nga* words perform a crucial function in the language which perhaps is not sufficiently accounted for by the label "adverb". It is on the *nga*-level that the being which the language has left unuttered is encountered. The being that is not in the *ay* is in the *nga* as affirmed or denied.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 316f.

The effect on the language of this absence of "being" is that it forgoes the ability to say "being" without a predicate. Instead, it must always predicate something about something. Apparently, the absence creates a spatio-temporal world-view where being is always being-in-the-world. The language appears structurally locked in within a spatio-temporal world. But that is only apparently, for the *nga*-level contains within itself the means for transcendence of the purely material. Another consequence concerns the articulation of an ontology in Tagalog. Not only does the language encounter being *in* the true, it can only express being *through* the true. Being and the true are one, but being remains unuttered even as it is affirmed *in* and *through* the true. A philosophy of being would not only be inseparable from a theory of knowledge but the two would form a unity of transcendence in immanence.

#### THE ABSENCE OF BEING AND "PRIMITIVENESS"

We must now come to grips with a question that is probably uppermost in the mind of the reader. This absence of the "most comprehensive expression of mere existence" is not peculiar to Tagalog. It has also been verified in some so-called primitive languages, such as the Algonquin languages in America.<sup>31</sup> Might not this absence in Tagalog then simply indicate that the language did not reach that stage of development required to achieve such an abstraction as mere existence? To build on such "primitive" foundations "modern" superstructures would then appear to be a dubious enterprise.

We may point out, in the first place, that our argument has been based on certain linguistic data which reveal certain linguistic structures which duplicate certain mental structures which in turn have a bearing on the question of being. We have not argued from

31. *Ibid.*, p. 315, n. 32: ". . . the Algonquin languages for example lack a universal verb of "being," but possess a great number of words designating being in this or that place, at this or that time, or in this or that special condition. In the Klamath language the verb (*gi*) which is used to express copulative "being" is actually a demonstrative particle signifying being here or being there. . . . The Indian languages of the Maya family also use certain demonstrative particles for predicative statement; when combined with tense signs, these particles very much resemble true substantive verbs. Yet none of them is equivalent to the universal and purely relational term "to be"; some express the nominal concept "given, postulated, present," while others indicate situation in a certain place or happening at a certain time. . . ."

any *genetic* processes which may have brought about such structures. We are confronted with a self-sufficient whole and self-contained structure and it is this which we have analyzed at least partially, as it is and not how it came to be. Whether this whole or any of its parts represent an arrested development remains outside the scope of the inquiry and is indeed irrelevant to it.

In the second place, it has been said of original thinkers that their successors have understood them better than they understood themselves, as philosophers have said and as the history of philosophy has shown again and again. It has also been said of a work of art that after its creation it acquires a being of its own so that, inserted in its own world of art, it can and does "mean" more than its creator ever intended. Is there not more reason to say the same of language which is the creation not of any one individual at any one time but of a community of people for an undetermined length of time? A language is a world by itself, a world that needs interpreting, being itself a particular interpretation of man and his world.

Finally, let us try to meet the issue of primitiveness directly. We have argued not merely from the absence of "to be" but also from the presence of *ay*. Using the same reasoning by which one might argue to an arrested development from the absence of "being," we could argue to a highly developed state from the presence of *ay*. For linguistic research has also shown that the copula "in our logical grammatical sense" is missing in many languages, including so-called highly developed languages, and Cassirer explains:

It is clear, however that language could only gradually attain to the abstraction of that pure being which is expressed in the copula. For language which in its beginnings is entirely bound up with this intuition of substantial objective existence, the expression of "being" as a pure transcendental form of relation can only be a late product arrived at through a variety of mediations.<sup>32</sup>

Not only is such a copula a late product, but the author implies that the copula as a pure form of relation must even be a later product than the expression of mere existence. What Cassirer says of the "being" copula, we can say with perhaps better reasons of the purely linking particle *ay*. For *ay* has no other being except as relation.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

If then the character of *ay* cautions against hasty *a priori* conclusions to "primitiveness," drawn mainly on the strength of some methodological assumptions, then perhaps there may be other explanations for this absence than merely a failure to reach the abstract heights of mere existence. Picking up the genetic argument, we might say that the presence of *ay* could have allowed the language to dispense with the "being" copula. And the linguistic function of *ay* is not the language's effort to "compensate" for the missing being as it is sometimes said. Rather *ay* is a distinctive creation of the language to fulfill quite adequately the function of synthesis and it does not have to aspire to be something else. Just as *ay* allowed the language to dispense with the "being" copula, the judgmental functions of *nga* words might have made the expression of mere existence unnecessary. But all that is not said as conclusions. They are rather more questions for inquiry. Whether such "genetic" questions can be answered with any definitiveness, that is still another question. At this point, we have found it more fruitful to inquire into the language as it is.

### CONCLUSION

We have essayed an interpretation of some aspects of the language. Its two-tiered structure, the *ay*- and the *nga*-levels, points to a corresponding dual structure of our knowing, the level of thinking and the level of judgment. These structures have an ontological significance with a direct bearing on the question of being. They point first of all to the *onto-logical* identity, the identity of being and the true, for without immanence there is no transcendence. But they also point to the *onto-logical* difference, the distinction between beings and their being. The being that is attained in the judgment is not a *what* that is conceived like an essence or an intelligibility that tells us the *how* and the *why* of things, but belongs to the dimensions of fact. The real is affirmed in our experience as factual. The language that does not utter the word nevertheless speaks of being — in its facticity. Like Parmenides, it has felt the need to think and say *that* being is.

In the end then the language does not offer an answer but a question. For out of this facticity of being springs as from its ground the question: why then are there things rather than not? While the question appears to be asking about the origin of things,

it is in truth a question about our future. Or rather, the whither is the ground of the wherefrom. Our openness (*kabukasan*) to being and the true has become a question about our future (*kinabukasan*). Here we move on another plane of the *nga*-level, from the dimensions of the true to those of the *good*, from the judgment of fact to the judgment of value. Here belongs Augustine's joyous "my heart is restless until it rests in thee," but here also we meet the existentialist nausea from the experience of *Angst*, the dread of nothingness. As ground of these extreme encounters with the future in the now is a primordial affirmation of being as value. From the conjunction of being as good and being as factual issues the question about our future. What meets us as our future when this fragile hold on being is released? The language has no ready answer. But it may be offering a stance. For it seems significant that the language, to express that other kind of assent in the other person, draws its inspiration from *wala*: nothing. As if, in the face of nothing, it summons forth *tiwala*: trust.

The Origins of language are shrouded in the misty origins of man himself. The genesis of a language transcends the boundaries of the communities that may now speak it, both in time and in space. But from those distant beginnings, there echoes still a word heard long ago and handed down from generation to generation to all who will hear through the tradition that is the language itself: when it is time to travel beyond the Horizon, bring with you this humility before the face of Being and this trust in the face of Nothing.

Thus speaks this language, a language of perhaps the original boat-people.