Case-neutralized NPs in Tagalog and the nature of heavy shift
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The existence of heaviness preferences is well-documented for Tagalog: as in English, heavier NPs tend to follow lighter ones in Tagalog [1,2]. In the Recent Perfective (RP) form, the case morphology of the arguments of some verbs is neutralized with the genitive form. From the perspectives of sentence processing, in such sentences, explicit morphological cues to distinguish verbal arguments from one another and from possessors are not available for the parser. Thus, if three NPs follow the verb, there is an ambiguity between the following two structures: [[NP₁NP₂NP₃] and [NP₁[NP₂NP₃]]. Here, one of the three NPs, either NP2 or NP3, must be a possessor of the preceding NP. How Tagalog speakers deal with such ambiguous sentences can distinguish two hypotheses on Tagalog’s heaviness preference: (i) heavy elements are located to the right in order to satisfy working memory or planning constraints [3,4,5]; or (ii) heaviness is a licensing condition on dislocation and thus only affects the acceptability of sentences which deviate from base Agent >> Patient order.

73 native Tagalog speakers rated the acceptability of sentences like (1). In (1), Case Form of NPs (Neutralized vs. Non-Neutralized) and placement of possessor (in first vs. second argument) are manipulated as independent factors (not all conditions shown). In the non-case-neutralizing normal perfective, 3-NP sequences are unambiguous provided the argument marked with “ang” is dislocated after the argument marked with “ng”. So in (1a-d) only a single unambiguous parse (equivalent to the translation provided) is possible, because the arguments of the verb are distinctly case-marked. In (1a,b), the heavier NP comes second, while in (1c,d), it come first. The additional factor of Plausibility (Possessed-Possessor sequence is plausible vs. implausible) was also varied in the non-case-neutralizing conditions. In (1a,d), the complex NP (possessed and possessor) is semantically plausible, while in (1b,c) it is implausible. Due to the absence of case cues, Plausibility is indistinguishable from Heaviness for the RP conditions. In RP conditions, NP2 can be parsed either as the possessor of NP1 or an argument of the verb and the possessed of NP3, with Plausibility serving to bias the parse to one constituency or the other. In (1e), the former parse is more plausible, while in (1f), the latter is. If Tagalog’s heaviness preference is a general parsing effect (hypothesis i), it should be equally operative in case-neutralized and non-case-neutralized sentences. If it is dislocation-specific (hypothesis ii), it may be absent in the RP because the case-neutralization allows either NP (heavy or light) to be construed as subject or object: the examples can be parsed as not including dislocated NPs because the neutralized case-marking allows a base-position parse. For example, when the plausible heavy NP is first (1e), it can be parsed as the subject, eliminating dislocation from base order from the structure.

In this experiment, location of the [Possessed-Possessor] sequence had a significant effect on the unambiguous normal perfective sentences. Participants significantly preferred [NP1[NP2NP3]] over [[NP1NP2]NP3]. (Mean rating 2.8 vs. 2.5, 5 pt. Likert scale, p<0.001) In the RP, however, the conditions were statistically indistinguishable (Mean rating 2.3 and 2.2, p>0.5). The heaviness preference affects overall acceptability of unambiguous sentences, but does not in case-neutralized RP contexts. This suggests that Tagalog’s heaviness preference is a constraint over only NPs dislocated from base order that need not apply in RP sentences.

(1a) a. Pumili ng narses ang pasyente.  b. Pumili ng narses ang pasyente ang rantsero.  
chose case1 cowboy case2 nurse case1 patient.  chose case1 nurse case2 patient case1 cowboy  
The patient’s nurse chose the cowboy.  The cowboy’s patient chose the nurse.
(1c) a. Pumili ng narses ang pasyente.  b. Pumili ng narses ang pasyente ang rantsero.  
chose case1 cowboy case1 nurse case2 patient.  chose case1 nurse case1 patient case2 cowboy  
The patient chose the nurse’s cowboy.  The cowboy chose the patient’s nurse.
(1e) a. Kapipili lang ng narses ng pasyente ng rantsero.  b. Kapipili lang ng narses ng pasyente ng rantsero.  
RP. chose just case1 nurse case1 patient case1 cowboy RP. chose just case1 cowboy case1 nurse case1 patient  
~The cowboy just chose the patient’s nurse.  ~The patient’s nurse just chose the cowboy.