Contrastive Analysis:

A Comparison of the English and Tagalog Phonetics & Phonology

Trisha Alcisto

University of Massachusetts Boston
Introduction to a Contrastive Analysis

This essay will explore and describe some similarities and differences between the sound systems of Tagalog, commonly referred to as Filipino, and English. For the purposes of this paper, I have obtained a linguistic description of the Tagalog language, provided by Paul Schachter (2008) in a chapter from Comrie’s *The World’s Major Languages*, as well as information collected from interviews with two native speakers of Tagalog. Both interviewees live in Manila, Philippines and are advanced users of English as an L2. From here forward, I will refer to them as Perry and Cha respectively. Perry is a male employed by an outsourcing company as an “English accent coach” for Filipino employees who speak on the phone with native English speakers daily. This demonstrates that he is considered to have explicit knowledge of English pronunciation as compared to that of Tagalog. Cha, like Perry and the rest of the Filipinos of their generation, was educated in English from primary school and forward, but does not believe that she has any explicit knowledge of English nor Tagalog. Her profession does also require, however, the daily use of both languages with colleagues and clients.

A Comparison of Two Languages

English and Tagalog belong to different language families: English from the West-Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family (Meyer, 2009) and Tagalog from the Western-Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family tree (Schachter, 2008). Tagalog is rated by the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute as falling into second most difficult group of languages to learn because of “significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English” (Language, n.d.). Despite this rating and the lack of a common ancestor (so far as history has been able to pinpoint!), the sound system of Tagalog may not appear so strange to the English speaker. As I will reveal below, the sounds and patterns of Tagalog should be surprisingly familiar to the L1 English ear, although clearly, there are notable differences
between these two languages. In the remainder of this discussion, I will conduct a contrastive analysis in which I compare the languages’ respective consonant and vowel systems, as well as a brief exploration of some phonotactic constraints.

A Note Regarding the Historical Context Responsible for Similarities

Some of the similarities previously alluded to can be attributed to the fact that the Philippines experienced hundreds of years of colonization and occupation by speakers of Spanish and English, both of which are members of the Indo-European language family (Schachter, 2008). Additionally, globalization has ensured the continuing presence of English as a lingua franca in the Philippines and in Asia, providing native speakers of Tagalog constant contact with English. Tagalog, therefore, has an extensive inventory of borrowed words from Spanish and English, which has introduced certain sounds and patterns that would not be present in the language otherwise. Despite the fact that the sound system has been affected by contact with Spanish and English, my comparison of the English and Tagalog sound systems will attempt to exclude discussions of phonetic and phonological aspects that do not apply to native words.

A Comparison of the Consonant Systems

English has a rather extensive consonant sound inventory when compared to Tagalog, having 25 distinctive phonemes, including a fricative inventory of nine distinct sounds and two affricate consonants (Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010, p. 52). The native sounds of Tagalog contains only 16 phonemes, with only two fricatives and no affricates (Schachter, 2008). The two languages have the same nasal and glide inventories in common (/m/, /n/, /ŋ/ and /w/, /j/) with some differences in phonotactic constraints that will be explored later in the discussion.

Notable differences between the two systems include the manifestations of the orthographic letter ‘r.’ This grapheme is always pronounced in Tagalog as a trill (/r/), as in the Tagalog word for ‘but’ provided by Cha, /pero/, while English speakers pronounce a liquid (/l/)
with some regionally-based dialect differences allowing for an r-deletion post-vocallyically. (Schachter, 2008; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). The sound in English that is most like the Tagalog sound that corresponds with the grapheme ‘r’ is the tap [ɾ] from NAE that is an allophone of the phoneme /t/ post-vocallyically or following /ɹ/ (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

The sounds that correspond with the grapheme ‘l’ also highlight some more differences between Tagalog and English. This letter may be expressed as /l/ in both languages, but Perry maintains that Tagalog makes no use of the velarized allophone [ɬ] as it is used in English in certain distributions (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). He has also noted that L2 Tagalog speakers who speak English as a native language release their word-final /l/ in a way that native speakers do not, which makes him believe that the Tagalog /l/ is always unreleased, whereas the word-final English /l/ may be released. Llamzon’s (1966) description of Tagalog phonology confirms that the word-final /l/ remains unreleased. Perry provided the pronunciation of Philippine Airline’s nickname ‘PAL’ as an example. English speakers may pronounce this with the velarized lateral [ɬ] while native speakers pronounce it with the unreleased lateral [l].

The voiced and voiceless plosive inventories of English and Tagalog contain the same phonemes except in the case of the English allophone [ʔ] which is a phoneme (/ʔ/) in Tagalog. Depending on dialect, the glottal plosive may be used in English speech as an allophone, for example, of the phoneme /t/, but it is never distinctive (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). In Tagalog, the glottal plosive is always phonemic, as evident in the two example words provided by Cha: /baon/, which means ‘allowance’ and /baʔon/, which means ‘bury’ (Schachter, 2008). Another difference between the plosive systems is in the allophonic variation of the voiceless stops. According to Perry, the phonemes /p/, /t/, and /k/ are never aspirated in Tagalog as they are in English in certain positions. We can see this if we return to Perry’s example of the
pronunciations of PAL. The version produced by native speakers sounds like /pʰæl/ while Tagalog speakers would say /pal/, with the /l/ unreleased.

As previously mentioned, some sounds are present in the language thanks to loanwords from Spanish and English, including the fricatives /f/ and /v/ and the affricates /ʃ/ and /ʤ/ (Schachter, 2008). While Schachter (2008) maintains that these sounds remain characteristic of borrowed words, Perry and Cha provided some examples that may contradict this restriction. From vernacular Tagalog, specific to a certain culture of Manila, Perry provided “charot,” pronounced /ʃarot/, which is an expression that means something similar to English’s “just kidding.” He does not believe that this is a borrowed word, and if this is indeed a new word of Tagalog, it may reflect an expansion of the consonant system. Additionally, Cha and Perry discussed the actual pronunciations of the Tagalog words ‘diyan’ and ‘Diyos,’ ‘there’ and ‘God’ respectively. According to these native speakers, these words are reported to be palatalized in rapid, casual speech as /ʤan/ and /ʤos/ whereas standard, deliberate, and formal pronunciations would sound like /djan/ and /djos/. Interestingly, although Schachter (2008) does not mention the fricative /ʃ/ as being present in Tagalog, palatalization appears to produce this segment in the rapid pronunciation of the Tagalog word “siya,” which is a gender-neutral third person singular subject pronoun (he or she). Perry and Cha explain that slow, deliberate pronunciation would sound like /sija/, but in common, rapid speech is actually pronounced /ʃa/. Further research has confirmed that pronunciations of /si/ and /sy/ in speech become palatalized as described by the native speakers interviewed (Llamzon, 1966).

A Comparison of the Vowel Systems

As was the case in the comparison of the consonant systems, the English sound system is characterized by a significantly larger vowel system. The English vowel inventory consists of 14 distinct vowel sounds, including several diphthongs that are paired with the glides /j/ or /w/
(Celce-Murcia, 2010). According to Schachter (2008), the Tagalog system has only five simple vowels: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, and /u/, in addition to distinctions made via vowel length in certain positions. The vowel sound /a/ is the only sound in the Tagalog sound inventory that is not also present in English. While the simple /e/ is not part of the English vowel inventory either, the diphthongized version, /et/ is (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). The English /i/, /o/, and /u/ are also typically pronounced with a glide in English, transcribed by Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) as /iy/, /ow/ and /uw/ respectively.

In addition to the simple Tagalog vowels provided by Schachter (2008), Perry and Cha shared some examples of Tagalog diphthongs that also exist in the English vowel system. The first example is the diphthong /ɔɪ/ from the Tagalog word ‘Pinoy,’ a colloquialism that is used to describe a person or a thing (perhaps music or food) as being from the Philippines. The interjection ‘hoy!’ was also provided, but it is probably borrowed from Australian English as it is a common Australian interjection, and due to the Philippines’ proximity to Australia, Australian tourism is high and many Filipinos in the outsourcing industry work for Australian companies. When I asked for more examples, Cha insisted that there were none, but with great effort, Perry remembered Kahoy /kahɔɪ/, the Tagalog word for wood. The second diphthong provided is /au/ from the word Pinay, which means the same as Pinoy, but is marked for the female gender. Cha also provided /buhaɪ/ (life) and /bahaɪ/ (home), which are both native words. Neither Perry nor Cha could provide Tagalog examples of the rounded diphthongs in the English words ‘no,’ ‘blue,’ or ‘how’ and insisted that the vowels /o/ and /u/ remain simple in Tagalog as in the pronunciations /ʔoʔo/ (yes) and /ʔuʔu/ (colloquial child-talk for excrement). Further research revealed, however, that that the combinations of the glides /y/ and /w/ can be combined with vowels to also produce the following diphthongs: /ey/, /uy/, /iw/, /aw/, and /uw/ (Llamzon,
1966). Cha and Perry’s inability to provide any examples of these is probably due to my failure to aptly describe these sounds.

As referenced earlier, the short and long counterparts of the five simple vowels are phonemic in the non-word-final position, making words that differ only in the length of a vowel minimal pairs, as is evident in the examples: /ʔaːso/ (dog) and /ʔaso/ (smoke) (Schachter, 2008). When I provided these examples, Perry added the minimal pairs /pito/ and /pitoː/ which mean ‘whistle’ and ‘seven,’ respectively. This discussion, however, proved to be confusing for both native speakers. Schachter (2008) explained that “stress is closely tied to vowel length” (p. 835) and indeed, Perry and Cha could confirm the distinction between the examples provided in the text (as well as in those that they provided themselves), but they could not verify that any of the syllables truly varied in vowel length, and instead attributed the differences between the minimal pairs to stress alone. This may demonstrate that phonemic vowel length is a part of the native speaker’s unconscious linguistic competence and not available to be verbalized or explained.

**Distribution and Phonotactic Constraints**

While many phonemes are common between the two languages, a major difference evident in pronunciation can be attributed to differences in phonotactic constraints. English phonotactics allows as many as three consonants to occur in both the onset and the coda of a syllable with specific constraints and possibilities for each position. Tagalog, on the other hand, is limited to consonant clusters where the second consonant can only be a glide, as in the examples provided by Schacter (2008): ‘diyan’ /djan/ and ‘buwan’ /bwan/ (Meyer, 2009). Interestingly, neither Perry nor Cha could produce any additional examples of such consonant clusters, maintaining first that diyan is actually palatalized as described earlier, and that there is always a vowel pronounced between any consonant and the glides /w/ and /j/. The only consonant clusters that Perry could provide included words that are borrowed from Spanish, such
as abrilata /abrilata/ for can-opener, klima /klima/ for weather, platito /platito/ for saucer, and krayola /krajola/ for crayon, although he did not already know that they are loanwords.

An interesting difference between English and Tagalog is the permissible distribution of the velar nasal /ŋ/. This segment is the only consonant that cannot occur word-initially in English although it is indeed permissible in Tagalog (Meyer, 2009). The interviewees provided the examples ngipin /ŋipin/ (teeth) and ngayon /ŋajon/ (now).

A constraint that English and Tagalog have in common involves the glottal fricative /h/, which exists in both languages. Cha demonstrated its use in the Tagalog word halo-halo, which is the name of a traditional dessert, pronounced /halo halo/. This sound can occur syllable-initially, but never syllable-finally in either language (Meyer, 2009; Llamzon, 1966). Cha and Perry confirmed this, and as such, could not provide any examples of words that are h-final. In Tagalog, this may be attributed to “complementary distribution with the glottal stop /ʔ/” (Llamzon, 1966, p. 33) which does occur word-finally as in Perry’s example /poʔ/, a commonly used honorific marker that cannot be directly translated.

**Conclusion: Unrelated Languages with Similar Sound Systems**

In the preceding sections, we have seen the ways that the English and the Tagalog sound inventories differ and/or are similar. I suggested earlier that Tagalog may not sound so strange to the English ear thanks to the fact most of the consonants and vowel sounds that occur in Tagalog also occur in English. Although the reverse is not also true, commonly used loanwords from English and Spanish offer Tagalog speakers regular use and exposure to the sounds that do not exist in their native phonology (Schachter, 2008). To support this fact, Perry and Cha insist that any Filipino that has attended school in the Philippines will regularly produce the English sounds /θ/ and /z/ as Tagalog speakers regularly use phrases such as “thank you” and “please” amongst themselves, even when no English speakers are present. I did not explore differences in stress or
intonation patterns which may provide evidence for greater differences between the sound systems. It is very likely that a contrastive analysis of morphology and syntax would also highlight much more dramatic differences than those presented here, possibly lending itself to insight as to why Tagalog has been rated as difficult to learn for native English speakers.
References


