

Tagalog Quirks

The basis for *Pilipino*, the national language of the Philippines, is *Tagalog*. It is the language of metropolitan Manila and the surrounding contiguous provinces - Aurora, Bataan, Batangas, Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna, Nueva Ecija, Quezon, Rizal. The Tagalog region is home to 25 million people, a quarter of the population. Every language has its quirks and Tagalog is no exception. For example it has a propensity for repeating syllables. I guess it is for emphasis but it really doesn't appear to be necessary. Take our favorite dessert *halo-halo*, a mixture of sweet beans, coconut, ice cream, shaved ice, jackfruit and custard. *Halo* means mix, but somehow that is not enough. It has to be repeated. Would you translate it as mix-mix or mixed dessert? We say *pakpak* for wings. Some human body parts are also repetitive, but let's not get too detailed. One example is *kili-kili* for armpit. The rest are rather intimate. Sun is *araw*, but saying *araw-araw* means every day. Same for *gabi-gabi* for every night. *Isa-isa* means one by one; *unti-unti* is little by little. There is a volcano on the island of Camiguin, off the northern coast of Mindanao. The Philippines has a lot of volcanoes, scores of them. This one is called Hibok Hibok. A district in Manila is named *Balik Balik* (also spelled *Balic Balic*). *Balik* means return in Tagalog. Imagine you were having a conversation with somebody from Balik-Balik, asking the other person, "where are you going?" The answer in Tagalog is "*babalik ako sa Balik Balik*" or "I am returning to Return Return." It sounds better in Tagalog. The island of Panay has three provinces, one of which is Iloilo. (The resort island of Boracay is off the northwest coast of Panay.) *Labolabo* means a free for all. *Ilang-ilang* is a tree whose scented flowers are used for perfume. *Itik* means duckling and *itik-itik* is a folk dance imitating the ducklings. *Waray Waray* is the language of the islands of Leyte and Samar. I am a *lolo*, a grandfather. The most exclusive golf and country club in metro Manila is Wack Wack.

Why is this so? A little searching reveals that this phenomena even has a term - reduplication. It is supposed to be common among Austronesian languages, whatever that is. Whenever I write an essay, I conduct some due diligence to ascertain some facts and definitions. What often happens is that I learn something new, like reduplication and Austronesian. I've now learned that Philippine languages belong to the Austronesian group. All these languages combined are spoken by nearly 400 million people, sixty percent of whom are Indonesian. Gee, all I wanted to do was poke fun at the language habits of Filipinos. What was said by Ecclesiastes at the end of Chapter 1, verse 9? "*And there is no new thing under the sun.*" There are actually books on Tagalog reduplication - written by American authors! One dates back to the beginning of the American colonial period and was published by the American Journal of Philology in 1917. I guess I'm not so clever after all.

The American soldiers who first came to the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century weren't immune to reduplication. They referred to Filipinos pejoratively as *googoo*. This came from *gugo*, a large tree whose bark was used by Filipino women to wash their hair. Today you can buy commercial hair products made from *gugo*, all with beneficial claims.

This reduplication even carries on with nicknames. Dee-Dee, Dodo, Jojo (never Joe-Joe), Jun-Jun, Mak-Mak, Mimi, Nene, Ning-Ning, Tintin, Ting-Ting. Tingting also means a type of broom. My eldest brother's nickname was Toto, same as Dorothy's pet. For the information of

Tagalog Quirks

my Philippine based readers, Dorothy was the character played by Judy Garland in “Wizard of Oz.” Toto also happens to be the brand name of a Japanese toilet. But hold the joke, they have a model that retails for \$5,800. My brother-in-law is Pepe, but we can blame that on the Spaniards. Pepe is the universal Hispanic nickname for Jose. The president of the Philippines, Benigno Aquino III, is called Noynoy. The son of former president Ferdinand Marcos is Bongbong.

Tagalog has its share of heteronyms, having a vastly different meaning depending on how it is pronounced. Of course that is nowhere near as complicated as Chinese, which has four tones. No, we aren’t getting into Chinese tones. *Suka* could mean vinegar or vomit, which I suppose has some similarity. *Iba* is the main town of Zambales. *Iba* also means other. My favorite is *supot*, which could mean a bag or uncircumcised. Teasing another kid by calling him *supot* is one way to start a fight. *Lalaki* is male or to grow. Here’s more examples - *puno* (tree or full), *basa* (read or wet), *baka* (maybe or cow), *baon* (buried or taking something, food or money, for later).

Baba is downstairs, get off or could be chin. I wonder if that came from the Spanish barba or beard. Here is how a conversation might go between a passenger and a jeepney driver. Passenger - bababa (getting off); driver - bababa ba?; passenger - bababa! If you can get the inflection right and say it fast, you’ve got Tagalog mastered.

Here’s a few more words used when referring to plurals: sila-sila (they they), sino-sino (who who), kami-kami (we we), tayo-tayo (us us), ano-ano (what what), minsan-minsan (sometimes sometimes).

This concludes a brief Tagalog lesson. I don’t know how much reduplication there is in Bahasa Indonesia or other Austronesian languages, but I bet Tagalog tops them all.

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Oct. 1, 2013