



Answering polar questions in Tagalog: A discourse-based analysis^{*}

Shirley N. Dita^{**} · Jong-Bok Kim^{***}
(De La Salle University · Kyung Hee University)

Dita, Shirley N. and Jong-Bok Kim. 2026. Answering polar questions in Tagalog: A discourse-based analysis. *Linguistic Research* 43(1): 31-59. This paper explores strategies for forming and answering polar questions in Tagalog. While König and Siemund (2007) identify six strategies for generating polar questions cross-linguistically, only three are evident in Tagalog: special intonation patterns, interrogative particles, and special tags. More significantly, this study reveals that Tagalog exhibits flexibility in its answering system, employing all three response strategies described by Sadock and Zwicky (1985)—*yes/no* (polarity), *agree/disagree* (truth), and *echo* systems. Using authentic examples from the web-based corpus t1TenTen19, we demonstrate that Tagalog response particles *oo* and *hindi* function as anaphoric elements referring to salient propositions in discourse, challenging simple binary typologies and supporting recent discourse-based accounts of response particles (Kim 2024). This analysis contributes to our understanding of Philippine languages and cross-linguistic variation in answering systems. (De La Salle University · Kyung Hee University)

Keywords polarity, negative polarity, Tagalog, *yes-no* questions, response system, discourse analysis, contextual bias

1. Introduction

Asking questions and answering them has always been a fundamental aspect of human communication. Questions that require either a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ for an answer are called polar questions. Over the years, several nomenclatures have been used to refer to

* This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2022S1A5A2A03052578).

** First author

*** Corresponding author

these items: *yes-no* questions (Pope 1976), nexus questions (Sadock and Zwicky 1985: 179), polar questions (Dryer 2013), or polar interrogatives (König and Siemund 2007: 291). Polar interrogatives are typically used to inquire about the truth or falsity of the proposition they express (König and Siemund 2007). As is well established, polar questions, just like the other kinds of questions, are considered to be a universal feature in human language (Sadock and Zwicky 1985; König and Siemund 2007; Dryer 2013).

To illustrate polar questions in Tagalog, consider the following:

- (1) Q: Belgian *ba* si Paul?
 Belgian BA NOM Paul
 ‘Is Paul Belgian?’
 A: Oo, Belgian *siya*.
 Yes Belgian 3SG.NOM
 ‘Yes, he’s Belgian.’
 A’: Hindi, hindi *siya* Belgian.
 No NEG 3SG.NOM Belgian
 ‘No, he isn’t Belgian.’

Several studies have investigated polar questions across languages (Sadock and Zwicky 1985; König and Siemund 2007; Dryer 2013; Enfield et al. 2018; Moser 2018; Kim 2024, among others), while some have examined the syntax or pragmatics of these *yes-no* questions (Krifka 2013; Holmberg 2016; Kim 2024). In the extensive discussion of Dryer (2013) on polar questions, the inclusion of Tagalog is limited to identifying it as exhibiting the ‘question particle’. He describes Tagalog as having a second-position question particle *ba*, based on Schachter and Otañes’s (1972) rather limited discussion of questions in Tagalog.

Moser (2018), whose work focuses on answers to polarity questions, lists Tagalog as among those languages whose answering strategy is limited to polarity, claiming that the two other strategies—truth and echo—are not features of the language, based on a survey questionnaire. However, as this study will demonstrate, Moser’s classification is incomplete. Notably, the works of König and Siemund (2007), Sadock and Zwicky (1985), and Enfield et al. (2018) have not included Tagalog in their analysis. None of these studies has provided authentic corpus-based examples for

analysis. To date, there is no comprehensive paper that has dealt with polar questions and their answers in Tagalog using authentic language data.

Recent work by Kim (2024) on Korean response particles offers a discourse-based direct interpretation (DI) approach that can account for flexibility in answering systems. This analysis, adopting the analyses of Ginzburg and Sag (2000), Krifka (2013), and Farkas and Bruce (2010) that treat response particles as anaphoric to salient propositions in discourse rather than as derived through syntactic ellipsis, provides a promising direction for understanding Tagalog's answering system. Like Korean, Tagalog is a discourse-oriented language, and our corpus data reveal that its answering patterns are similarly sensitive to contextual factors.

1.1 The Tagalog language

Tagalog is an Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian language spoken in the Philippines. There are more than 90 million speakers of Tagalog worldwide, approximately 30 million of whom use it as their first language (Eberhard et al. 2023). Many Tagalog speakers can be found in southern Luzon, the country's main island, although speakers are distributed throughout the archipelago (Himmelman 2005). The use of Tagalog is widespread in the Philippines and abroad, with the language serving as the *de facto* "national working language" (Eberhard et al. 2023: 60). As the national language and one of the two official languages, Tagalog is used in many domains, such as business, education, religion, military, and government affairs. Tagalog is also the basis of the country's national language, Filipino.

Because the Philippines was colonized by the Americans for almost 50 years, many Tagalog speakers exhibit considerable proficiency in English. As a result, speakers naturally codeswitch from Tagalog to English and vice-versa (Nagaya 2022). Tagalog was also heavily influenced by Spanish following more than 300 years of colonization of the Philippine Islands, as well as by Chinese, and this impact is mostly seen in Tagalog's lexicon and phonology (Himmelman 2005).

1.2 Previous work on Tagalog questions

The seminal work of Schachter and Otañes (1972) on Tagalog is still considered

unprecedented even after more than 50 years since its publication. While the discussion of the language's features is comprehensive, the chapter on interrogatives is rather brief. They present five classes of questions in Tagalog: (1) *Yes-No* questions, (2) Alternative questions, (3) Confirmation questions, (4) Information questions, and (5) Please-repeat questions. For *Yes-No* questions, two strategies in asking these questions include rising intonation and the use of the particle *ba*. There was also a brief description of how *yes-no* questions can be answered. It is this gap that the present study addresses.

1.3 Research questions

The goal of this paper is to illustrate the formation of polar questions and the response system in Tagalog using authentic examples taken from a web-based corpus. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following:

1. What are the strategies in forming polar questions in Tagalog?
2. How are Tagalog polar questions answered?
3. What role does discourse context and bias play in Tagalog answering strategies?

In investigating how Tagalog forms polar questions, the framework of König and Siemund (2007) regarding ways of expressing polar questions across languages will be used, such as special intonation patterns, interrogative particles, the addition of special tags, disjunctive-negative structures, a change in the relative order of constituents, and particular verbal inflection.

As for the strategies in answering polar questions, this study employs Sadock and Zwicky's (1985: 189) proposal of a three-way distinction, but interprets it within Kim's (2024) discourse-based framework:

- (i) a *yes/no* or polarity-based system, in which an interjection answer such as 'yes' or 'no' matches the question's polarity (e.g., as found in English; Q: *Do you not see them?* A: *No* [= 'No, I do not see them']);

(ii) an agree/disagree or truth-based system, in which an interjection answer codes the truth or falsity of a proposition, regardless of how it was phrased in the question (e.g., as found in Korean or Japanese; Q: *Do you not see them?* A: *Yes* [= ‘Yes, it’s true, I do not see them’]);

(iii) an echo system, in which no special answer words are used at all. Instead, positive and negative responses to questions involve repeating the verb of the question, with or without additional material’ (a.g., as found in languages like Thai) (e.g., Q: *Do you not see them?* A: *(I do) not see them*).

However, as Kim (2024) demonstrates, these systems are not mutually exclusive within a language, and discourse factors can determine which system is employed in particular contexts.

2. Theoretical framework: A discourse-based direct interpretation approach

Before analyzing Tagalog data, we outline the theoretical framework that informs our analysis. Recent work on response particles has developed two main approaches: syntax-based ellipsis analyses and discourse-based Direct Interpretation (DI) approaches.

2.1 Syntax-based ellipsis approaches

The syntax-based approach, developed within the Minimalist Program (MP) by Kramer and Rawlins (2011) and Holmberg (2013, 2016), treats response particles as remnants of clausal ellipsis. In this view, stand-alone particles like *yes* and *no* are derived from full sentential structures through syntactic deletion operations. For instance, consider the following:

- (2) Q: Did Kim dance?
 A: Yes. ← [Yes [Kim danced]]
 B: No. ← [No, [Kim did not dance]]

Holmberg (2016) suggests the following assumed structures for these two particles:

- (3) a. [_{FocP} [yes +Pol] [_{PolP} he [_{Pol} [does, T, +Pol] [_{TP} [_{VP} drink coffee]]]]]
 b. [_{FocP} [no -Pol] [_{PolP} he [_{Pol} [does, T, -Pol] [_{TP} [_{VP} drink coffee]]]]]

As given in the structures, the particles are in the Spec of FocP and assigns an affirmative (+) or a negative (-) value to the polarity variable of the head Pol. As such, Holmberg (2016) posits elaborate functional projections including PolP and FocP,

Within the MP, the polarity value is determined by syntactic structures, and parametric differences between languages are attributed to different positions of negation in syntactic structures. Compare the following:

- (4) Q: Isn't Alfonso coming to the party?
 A: No. (= he isn't coming to the party.)
 (5) Q: Is Alfonso not coming to the party?
 A: Yes. (= he is not coming to the party.)

Within Holmberg's analysis, the responding particles here would have the following structures:

- (6) a. [_{FocP} no [_{uNeg}] [_{PolP} Alfonso [_{Pol} isn't [_{iNeg}] [_{TP} coming to the party]]]]]
 b. [_{FocP} [yes, +Pol] [_{PolP} Alfonso [_{Pol}[is, T, +Pol] [_{TP} [_{VP} is [_{VP} not coming to the party]]]]]]]

In (6a), the particle *no* assigns a negative value to the head of PolP, and the PolP undergoes ellipsis under identity. In (6b), the response particle *yes* does not confirm the positive statement, but agrees with the negative proposition since the negation is within the lower VP. By assuming that this kind of lower negation holds for languages with the truth-based answering system, his analysis attributes the difference in the position of negation to the difference in the interpretation of 'no' in the polarity-based and the truth-based answering systems.

However, this type of structure-based MP approach faces several challenges (see

Kim 2024 for details):

- It requires multiple versions of particles depending on their antecedent properties
- It struggles to account for contextual bias effects
- It needs complex mechanisms (negative concord, interpretability features) to avoid double negation
- It cannot easily explain why the same language uses different answering strategies in different contexts.

2.2 Discourse-based direct interpretation approaches

The DI approach, advocated by Ginzburg and Sag (2000), Krifka (2013), Roelofsen and Farkas (2015), and most recently by Kim (2024), treats response particles as non-sentential utterances with no hidden syntactic structure. Instead, these particles are anaphoric elements that refer to salient propositions in discourse.

Within the DI framework, polar questions are treated as 0-ary proposition abstracts with an empty parameter set. The meaning of a polar question can be represented as the following (Ginzburg and Sag 2000):

(7) $\lambda\{ \} [P]$

where P represents the proposition being questioned. This simply means that polar questions are questioning whether the proposition P is true or not. At the same time, according to Ginzburg and Sag (2000), a polar question evokes structured discourse information including:

- **MAX-QUD** (Maximal Question Under Discussion): The question currently being addressed.
- **SAL-UTT** (Salient Utterance): The most salient propositional information in context.

Within this analysis, response particles function as anaphoric elements that pick up

a propositional discourse referent introduced by the antecedent. The key insight is that the interpretation of response particles depends on the lexical properties of the particles themselves, the salient proposition (SAL-UTT) evoked by the discourse context, and contextual factors including evidential and epistemic bias (see Kim 2024).

Kim (2024) proposes that the difference between polarity-based languages (like English) and truth-based languages (like Korean) lies not in syntactic structure but in what proposition is taken as salient:

Polarity-based systems (e.g., English):

- Both positive and negative PQs take the evoked positive proposition as default salient information
- Response particles affirm or disaffirm this positive proposition

Truth-based systems (e.g., Korean):

- Both positive and negative PQs introduce their own proposition as default salient information. This default can be overridden by discourse factors like bias
- Response particles affirm or disaffirm the salient proposition provided by context.

Kim (2024) demonstrates that even truth-based languages like Korean can follow polarity-based patterns when contextual bias (particularly positive evidential bias) overrides the default salient proposition.

2.3 The role of contextual bias

Kim (2024) identifies two types of bias that affect answering systems:

- (8) a. Evidential bias: Evidence available to all participants in the discourse (visual, aural, or inferential)
- b. Epistemic bias: Speaker's belief or expectation about the truth of the

proposition

These biases can affect:

- The interpretation of negative polar questions (outer vs. inner negation)
- Which proposition becomes salient in discourse
- Which answering strategy is employed

2.4 Why this framework for Tagalog

We adopt the DI framework for Tagalog for several reasons:

1. Discourse orientation: Like Korean and Chinese, Tagalog is a discourse-oriented language where anaphoric elements freely pick up discourse antecedents beyond sentence boundaries
2. Flexibility: Our corpus data show that Tagalog does not rigidly follow one answering system
3. Contextual sensitivity: Tagalog speakers' choice of response particles appears sensitive to contextual factors
4. Parsimony: The DI approach requires no elaborate syntactic machinery and naturally explains variation

In the following sections, we demonstrate that Tagalog response particles *oo* 'yes' and *hindi* 'no' behave as anaphoric elements whose interpretation depends on discourse structure and contextual bias, supporting the discourse-based account.

3. Method

Unless otherwise specified, all data are extracted from the sub-corpus of the Tenten Corpus Family, called tTenTen 2019 Tagalog (Filipino) Web-based corpus. The corpus name is formed by prefixing with the two-letter ISO-639-1 code for the language and suffixing with two digits for the year of collection. The tTenTen 2019 Tagalog (Filipino) corpus has 198,303,250 words. The corpus was POS-tagged using a

Filipino-tagger model (Go and Nocon 2017) based on the Stanford parser. All collocational analyses and extractions were performed using the SketchEngine concordance and Corpus Query Language (CQL) search tools.

Following Kim's (2024) discourse-based approach, attention was paid not only to the question-answer pairs but also to available contextual information that might signal bias (evidential or epistemic) which could affect particle interpretation. Where corpus context was insufficient, constructed examples based on native speaker intuition are provided and marked accordingly.

To locate interrogative sentences in Tagalog, the search aimed at targeting all sentences with question marks by typing <s/> containing “^\\?\\\$” in the search box. Rather than just searching for interrogative markers/particles, this was done to ensure that all instances of polar questions are captured. The asterisk stands for any character, and the backslash “escapes” the normal function of the question mark; thus, the “?” symbol in the search stands for actual instances of question marks in the corpus. This search revealed all types of interrogatives, including alternative and information questions. The identification of polar questions was done manually based on the criterion that they should ask for “polar” answers, i.e., the truth or falsity of the proposition (König and Siemund 2007).

Of the 198,303,250 words of the tTenTen 2019 Tagalog (Filipino), the query of instances that contain “?” yielded 1,066,484 or 4,580.04 per million tokens (0.46% of the corpus).

4. Results

In this section, the strategies for forming polar questions will first be presented, followed by a detailed analysis of the strategies for answering these questions within the discourse-based framework.

4.1 Formation of polar questions in Tagalog

Of the six ways of expressing polar questions that König and Siemund (2007) presented, we argue that Tagalog exhibits three of them: (a) special intonation patterns, (b) interrogative particles, and (c) the addition of special tags. As König and Siemund

note, the first three ways are the most common across languages, Tagalog included. These will be discussed in turn.

4.1.1 Special intonation pattern

As Schachter and Otañes (1972: 51) explain, just like English, Tagalog *yes-no* questions are marked by a characteristic rising intonation pattern. König and Siemund (2007) note that some languages have the contour at the beginning of the question sentence, but in Tagalog, just like many languages including English, the contour is towards the end of the sentence. Here are some examples to illustrate this:

- (9) a. Maulan bukas?
 rainy tomorrow
 ‘Will it be rainy tomorrow?’
 b. Mayroon kayong discount?
 have 2PL.NOM discount
 ‘Do you have a discount?’
 c. Nakita mo si Maria?
 see.PERF 2SG.GEN NOM Maria
 ‘Did you see Maria?’

These examples demonstrate that Tagalog can form polar questions through intonation alone, without any overt question markers. The declarative word order is maintained, and only the rising intonation signals the interrogative force.

4.1.2 Interrogative particles

Tagalog employs the second-position interrogative particle *ba* to mark polar questions. This particle typically appears after the first major constituent:

- (10) a. Estudyante ba si Juan?
 student BA NOM Juan
 ‘Is Juan a student?’

- b. Kumain ka ba ng tanghalian?
 eat.PERF 2SG.NOM BA GEN lunch
 ‘Did you eat lunch?’
- c. Sa Manila ba siya nakatira?
 LOC Manila BA 3SG.NOM live
 ‘Does he/she live in Manila?’

The particle *ba* provides an explicit marker of interrogative force and is commonly used in formal or emphatic contexts. As Schachter and Otañes (1972) note, sentences with *ba* are less likely to be interpreted as echo questions or rhetorical questions compared to those with intonation alone.

4.1.3 The addition of special tags

Tagalog also employs tag questions, with several variants including *di ba*, *hindi ba*, and *ano*:

- (11) a. Maganda ang pelikula, di ba?
 beautiful NOM movie TAG
 ‘The movie is beautiful, isn't it?’
- b. Hindi ka pupunta, ano?
 NEG 2SG.NOM go.FUT TAG
 ‘You're not going, are you?’
- c. Matalino si Pedro, hindi ba?
 intelligent NOM Pedro TAG
 ‘Pedro is intelligent, isn't he?’

These tags typically appear at the end of statements and seek confirmation or agreement from the hearer. The tags *di ba* and *hindi ba* derive from *hindi* ‘no’ + *ba* (question particle), while *ano* ‘what’ has been grammaticalized as a tag (see Bautista 2011; Lim and Borlongan 2011).

Importantly, the choice of question formation strategy can interact with answering strategies, as we demonstrate in the following section.

4.2 Answering strategies in Tagalog: A discourse-based analysis

This section presents the core contribution of our study. We demonstrate that Tagalog employs all three answering systems described by Sadock and Zwicky (1985), and that the choice among them is determined by discourse factors including question structure, contextual bias, and predicate type. This finding challenges Moser's (2018) classification of Tagalog as purely polarity-based.

Following Kim's (2024) discourse-based framework, we propose that Tagalog response particles *oo* 'yes' and *hindi* 'no' are anaphoric elements that refer to salient propositions in discourse. The interpretation of these particles depends on:

1. The default salient proposition evoked by the question
2. Contextual bias (evidential or epistemic) that can override the default
3. The structure and semantics of the question predicate

We analyze each answering system in turn, providing corpus examples and theoretical explanation.

4.2.1 The polarity system in Tagalog

In the polarity system, response particles agree with the polarity of the answer proposition rather than with the truth value of the questioned proposition. This is the default system for positive polar questions in Tagalog.

- (12) Q: Kumain ka na ba?
 eat.PERF 2SG.NOM already BA
 'Have you eaten already?'
- A1: Oo. (kumain na ako)
 yes (eat.PERF already 1SG.NOM)
 'Yes. (I have eaten already.)'
- A2: Hindi. (hindi pa ako kumain)
 no (NEG yet 1SG.NOM eat.PERF)
 'No. (I haven't eaten yet.)'

The positive polar question in (12) evokes the following discourse structure:

- (13) MAX-QUD: $\lambda\{ \}$ [eat(you)]
 SAL-UTT: [eat(you)]

The default salient proposition for a positive PQ is the positive proposition itself. The response particles are then anaphoric to this salient proposition:

- (14) Oo ‘yes’: AFFIRM [eat(you)]
 Hindi ‘no’: DISAFFIRM [eat(you)]

This pattern follows the polarity-based system: *oo* affirms the positive proposition, while *hindi* disaffirms it.

Negative Polar Questions with Positive Bias: Crucially, Tagalog also employs the polarity system for negative polar questions when there is positive contextual bias. This is precisely the pattern Kim (2024) identifies for Korean:

- (15) Context: Showing the hearer a photo with a man resembling Obama.
 Q: Hindi ba ito si Obama?
 NEG BA this NOM Obama
 ‘Isn’t this Obama?’
 A1: Oo, siya nga.
 yes 3SG.NOM indeed
 ‘Yes, it is (him).’
 A2: Hindi, hindi siya si Obama.
 no NEG 3SG.NOM NOM Obama
 ‘No, it isn’t Obama.’

Despite the negative form of the question, the evidential context (photo resembling Obama) creates a positive bias. The speaker believes the proposition “this is Obama” is likely true and seeks confirmation. This positive bias overrides the default negative salient proposition:

- (16) MAX-QUD: $\lambda\{ \}[-\text{Obama}(\text{this})]$
 SAL-UTT: $[\text{Obama}(\text{this})] \leftarrow$ overridden by positive bias

The response particles refer to the positive salient proposition:

- (17) Oo ‘yes’: AFFIRM $[\text{Obama}(\text{this})]$
 Hindi ‘no’: DISAFFIRM $[\text{Obama}(\text{this})]$

This follows the polarity-based pattern where *oo* affirms the positive proposition even though the question is negative in form. This is parallel to English *yes* in “Isn’t this Obama? Yes, it is.”

Consider another example from the corpus:

- (18) Context: Watching a runner winning the race with a record.

Q: Hindi ba mabilis ang atleta na iyon?
 NEG BA fast NOM athlete LIG that
 ‘Isn’t that athlete fast?’

A1: Oo, napakabilis niya!
 yes very.fast 3SG.GEN
 ‘Yes, he/she is very fast!’

A2: Hindi, hindi siya ganoon kabilis.
 no NEG 3SG.NOM that.much fast
 ‘No, he/she isn’t that fast.’

The positive evidential bias (visual evidence of winning with record) makes the positive proposition salient, and *oo* affirms this positive proposition.

4.2.2 The truth-based (agree/disagree) system in Tagalog

In the truth-based system, response particles indicate agreement or disagreement with the truth of the questioned proposition, regardless of its polarity. Tagalog employs this system for negative polar questions when there is negative bias or neutral context. Consider negative polar questions with negative bias:

(19) Context: Seeing her boyfriend's messy hair and assuming he might not have washed it.

Q: Hindi ka ba naligo kaninang umaga?
 NEG 2SG.NOM BA shower.PERF earlier morning
 'Didn't you take a shower this morning?'

A1: Oo, hindi ako naligo.
 yes NEG 1SG.NOM bathe.PERF
 'Yes, I didn't shower.'

A2: Hindi, naligo ako.
 no bathe.PERF 1SG.NOM
 'No, I did shower.'

The negative evidential bias (messy hair suggests not showering) makes the negative proposition salient. The negative PQ as default introduces a negative proposition, which is reinforced by the negative bias:

(20) MAX-QUD: $\lambda\{ \}[\neg\text{shower}(\text{you})]$
 SAL-UTT: $[\neg\text{shower}(\text{you})] \leftarrow$ reinforced by negative bias

The response particles refer to this negative salient proposition:

(21) *Oo* 'yes': AFFIRM $[\neg\text{shower}(\text{you})]$ = 'Yes, it's true I didn't shower'
Hindi 'no': DISAFFIRM $[\neg\text{shower}(\text{you})]$ = No, that's not true; I did shower'

This follows the truth-based system where *oo* agrees with the negative proposition. Note that in (19A1), *oo* is naturally followed by the negative statement *hindi ako naligo*, confirming the truth-based interpretation.

(22) Context: Speaker knows the hearer swims every morning but saw him at home in the morning.

Q: Hindi ka ba lumangoy kaninang umaga?
 NEG 2SG.NOM BA swim.PERF earlier morning
 'Didn't you swim this morning?'

A1: Oo, hindi ako lumangoy.
 yes NEG 1SG.NOM swim.PERF
 ‘Yes, I didn’t swim.’

A2: Hindi, lumangoy ako at bumalik na.
 no swim.PERF 1SG.NOM and return.PERF already
 ‘No, I swam and came back already.’

The negative evidential bias (seeing him at home when he usually swims) creates a situation where the negative proposition is salient, and *oo* agrees with this negative truth.

Negative Polar Questions in Neutral Context: Interestingly, when there is no clear evidential bias, both interpretations are possible, depending on the responder’s epistemic bias:

(23) Context: The speaker asks the hearer over the phone about the pandemic situation.

Q: Hindi ba delikado ang sitwasyon diyan?
 NEG BA dangerous NOM situation there
 ‘Isn’t the situation there dangerous?’

A1: Oo, (hindi) delikado.
 yes NEG dangerous
 ‘Yes, it’s not dangerous.’ (truth-based)

A2: Oo, delikado.
 yes dangerous
 ‘Yes, it is dangerous.’ (polarity-based)

In neutral contexts, the responder’s epistemic bias determines which proposition becomes salient. If the responder believes the situation is not dangerous, they follow the truth-based pattern (A1), affirming the negative proposition. If they believe the situation is dangerous, their positive epistemic bias makes the positive proposition salient, and they follow the polarity-based pattern (A2).

This flexibility demonstrates that Tagalog, like Korean (Kim 2024), does not rigidly follow one answering system but allows discourse factors to determine particle interpretation.

4.2.3 The echo system in Tagalog

In the echo system, no special answer words are used; instead, responses involve repeating elements from the question. In Tagalog, the echo system is particularly common with certain predicate types.

Statements introduced by modals such as *maaari*, *pwede* ‘can/may’, *gusto* ‘want’, and *kailangan* ‘need’ can be answered by echoing the modal:

- (24) Q: Pwede ba akong pumasok?
 can BA 1SG.NOM enter
 ‘Can I come in?’
 R: Pwede. (positive)
 can
 ‘Yes, you can.’
 Hindi pwede. (negative)
 NEG can
 ‘No, you can’t.’
- (25) Q: Gusto mo bang dumaan sa palengke?
 want 2SG.GEN BA.LIG drop.by LOC market
 ‘Do you want to drop by the market?’
 R: Gusto. (positive)
 want
 ‘Yes, I want (to).’
 Hindi. (negative)
 NEG
 ‘No (I don’t want to).’

Note that in (24), the modal *pwede* is echoed directly. In (25), either the modal *gusto* or the negative particle *hindi* alone can serve as the response. The use of modals suggests a positive bias—the answer most likely to the question is positive. Hence, a negative answer could be construed as face-threatening in this context.

Tagalog existential constructions with *mayroon/meron/may* ‘have/there is’ and *wala* ‘not have/there is not’ also employ the echo system:

- (26) Q: *Mayroon bang wifi dito?*
 exist BA.LIG wifi here
 ‘Is there wifi here?’
 R: *Mayroon/Meron.* (positive)
 exist
 ‘Yes, there is.’
Wala. (negative)
 not.exist
 ‘No, there isn’t.’
- (27) Q: *Wala ba kayong siguradong balita?*
 NEG.EXI BA 2PL.NOM sure=LIG news
 ‘Don’t you have reliable news?’
 R: *Wala.* (negative)
 NEG.EXI
 ‘No, we don’t.’
Mayroon/Meron. (positive)
 exist
 ‘Yes, we do.’

The existential verbs themselves function as response forms, with *mayroon/meron/may* indicating positive existence and *wala* indicating negative existence or non-possession.

In the echo system, the echoed element (modal or existential) functions as a propositional anaphor. The modal or existential verb stands for the entire proposition:

- (28) Q: ‘Can I come in?’
 MAX-QUD: $\lambda\{ \}$ [can(enter(I))]
 SAL-UTT: [can(enter(I))]
 R: *Pwede*. ‘Yes, you can.’
 Meaning: AFFIRM [can(enter(you))]

The modal *pwede* in the response is anaphoric to the proposition including the modal relation. Similarly for existentials:

- (29) Q: *Mayroon bang wifidito?* ‘Is there wifi here?’

MAX-QUD: $\lambda\{ \}$ [exist(wifi, here)]
SAL-UTT: [exist(wifi, here)]
R: *Mayroon*. 'Yes, there is.'
Meaning: AFFIRM [exist(wifi, here)]

The echo system is thus not fundamentally different from the polarity or truth-based systems in its discourse function—it simply employs a different linguistic form (verbal/modal echo rather than particle) to perform the anaphoric reference to the salient proposition.

4.2.4 Summary: Three systems in Tagalog

The evidence presented demonstrates that Tagalog employs all three answering systems:

Polarity System:

- Default for positive PQs
- Used for negative PQs with positive bias
- *Oo* affirms positive proposition; *hindi* disaffirms it

Truth-Based System:

- Used for negative PQs with negative bias or neutral context
- *Oo* affirms questioned proposition (even if negative); *hindi* disaffirms it

Echo System:

- Obligatory/preferred with modal predicates
- Obligatory/preferred with existential predicates
- Echoed element stands as propositional anaphor

This three-way pattern challenges simple typological classifications and supports the discourse-based analysis where contextual factors determine which system is employed.

5. Discussion

5.1 Tagalog as a discourse-oriented language

The flexibility in Tagalog answering strategies aligns with its status as a discourse-oriented language. Li and Thompson (1976) identify discourse orientation as a typological parameter distinguishing languages like Chinese, Japanese, and Korean from sentence-oriented languages like English. Discourse-oriented languages allow anaphoric elements to pick up discourse antecedents beyond sentence boundaries and show greater sensitivity to contextual factors in interpretation.

Tagalog exhibits key characteristics of discourse-oriented languages:

1. **Flexible word order** for information structure management
2. **Topic prominence** with topic markers like *ay*
3. **Extensive use of null anaphora** for subjects and objects
4. **Context-dependent interpretation** of many grammatical elements

Our findings on response particles fit this pattern. Like Korean (Kim 2024), Tagalog response particles do not refer rigidly to syntactic structures but pick up salient propositions from discourse, and this salience is determined by contextual factors including evidential and epistemic bias.

5.2 The role of contextual bias in Tagalog

Our corpus analysis reveals that contextual bias plays a crucial role in determining answering strategies. We identify two types of bias affecting Tagalog response particles:

Evidential Bias: Evidential bias refers to situational evidence available to discourse participants—visual, aural, or inferential information that suggests a particular proposition is likely true or false.

Negative evidential bias examples:

- Messy hair suggesting not showering (19)
- Seeing someone at home during their usual swimming time (22)

Positive evidential bias examples:

- Photo resembling a famous person (15)
- Witnessing an athlete's record-breaking performance (18)

When evidential bias is present, it strongly influences which proposition becomes salient, and consequently which answering system is employed.

Epistemic bias refers to the speaker's or responder's belief or expectation about the truth of a proposition, independent of immediate situational evidence. Example (23) demonstrates epistemic bias: In the absence of clear evidential bias (phone conversation about pandemic danger), the responder's own belief determines their interpretation. If they believe the situation is dangerous, they follow a polarity-based pattern; if they believe it's not dangerous, they follow a truth-based pattern. We can summarize the interaction as follows:

Question Type	Bias Type	Salient Proposition	System Used	Example
Positive PQ	(Any)	Positive	Polarity	(12)
Negative PQ	Positive evidential	Positive	Polarity	(15), (18)
Negative PQ	Negative evidential	Negative	Truth-based	(19), (22)
Negative PQ	Neutral (epistemic)	Variable	Either	(23)

This pattern demonstrates that Tagalog answering strategies are not determined solely by question form but by the interplay of question structure and discourse context.

5.3 Tagalog's mixed answering system

Our findings contradict Moser's (2018) classification of Tagalog as purely polarity-based. The corpus evidence clearly shows that Tagalog employs different answering strategies depending on:

1. Question structure (positive vs. negative PQ; predicate type)
2. Contextual bias (evidential and epistemic)

3. Discourse factors (what proposition is made salient)

This mixed system is predicted by Kim's (2024) discourse-based framework but would be difficult to account for in purely syntax-based approaches. If answering systems were determined by syntactic structure alone (e.g., position of negation), we would not expect the flexibility observed in Tagalog.

The discourse-based account offers a unified explanation:

(30) Core Principle:

Response particles *oo* and *hindi* in Tagalog are anaphoric elements that refer to salient propositions in discourse.

(31) Default Salience:

- a. Positive PQs: positive proposition is salient
- b. Negative PQs: negative proposition is default salient (truth-based), but this can be overridden

(32) Contextual Override:

Evidential or epistemic bias can override the default salient proposition, particularly for negative PQs, leading to polarity-based interpretation

(33) Predicate Type:

Certain predicates (modals, existentials) prefer or require echo responses

This account predicts precisely the patterns we observe in the corpus data.

5.4 Comparison with other Philippine languages

Recent work on other Philippine languages supports our findings. Aquino (2024) analyzes polarity questions in Cebuano (another major Philippine language), and Fabregas (2024) examines the Asi language. While detailed comparison is beyond the scope of this paper, preliminary examination suggests that other Philippine languages may show similar flexibility in answering strategies.

Comparative research is needed to determine whether discourse orientation and

answering flexibility are characteristics of Philippine languages more broadly. If so, this would have implications for Austronesian typology and for understanding the historical development of these systems.

5.5 Implications for linguistic Typology

Our findings have several implications for linguistic typology. As we have noted, the traditional binary classification of languages as either polarity-based or truth-based (Pope 1976; Sadock and Zwicky 1985; Jones 1999) cannot capture languages like Tagalog and Korean that employ both systems depending on context. We have proposed that a key typological parameter is whether contextual bias can override default answering patterns. Some languages (perhaps English) show more rigid systems, while others (Korean, Tagalog, possibly Chinese) allow discourse factors to determine particle interpretation.

Languages may employ different answering systems for different construction types (as Tagalog does with modal and existential predicates), challenging the assumption that each language has a single answering system. Our analysis supports the discourse-based Direct Interpretation approach over syntax-based ellipsis approaches for several reasons. The DI approach naturally accounts for the flexibility observed in Tagalog, while syntax-based approaches would need to posit multiple versions of particles or complex structural variations. The DI approach requires no elaborate syntactic machinery (PolP, FocP, movement, deletion operations) but simply treats particles as anaphors to discourse propositions. The DI approach can also explain variation between languages and within languages by reference to discourse factors rather than requiring different syntactic structures for each pattern. The DI approach naturally incorporates contextual bias, while syntax-based approaches must stipulate how syntactic structures are affected by discourse context. The Tagalog data thus provide strong support for discourse-based accounts of response particles and suggest that similar analyses may be fruitful for other languages.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided the first comprehensive corpus-based analysis of polar

questions and answering strategies in Tagalog. Our findings can offer answers to the research questions of this study. The first question was what are the strategies in forming polar questions in Tagalog? Our answer is that Tagalog employs three of the six strategies identified by König and Siemund (2007):

- Special intonation patterns (rising intonation at sentence end)
- Interrogative particles (second-position particle *ba*)
- Special tags (*di ba*, *hindi ba*, *ano*)

These strategies can be used alone or in combination, with *ba* providing more explicit interrogative marking and tags typically seeking confirmation.

The second research question was how are Tagalog polar questions answered? We have noted that Tagalog employs all three answering systems described by Sadock and Zwicky (1985):

1. Polarity system: Default for positive PQs; used for negative PQs with positive bias
2. Truth-based system: Used for negative PQs with negative bias or neutral context
3. Echo system: Preferred/required for modal and existential predicates

Contrary to Moser's (2018) classification, Tagalog is not purely polarity-based but shows flexibility across all three systems.

The third research question was what role does discourse context and bias play? We have demonstrated that Discourse context and bias are crucial determinants of answering strategies:

- Evidential bias (situational evidence) strongly influences which proposition becomes salient
- Epistemic bias (speaker's belief) can determine interpretation in neutral contexts
- Contextual override: Positive bias can override the default negative salience of negative PQs, leading to polarity-based interpretation

6.2 Theoretical contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First of all, the Tagalog data strongly support Kim's (2024) discourse-based Direct Interpretation framework. Response particles function as anaphoric elements referring to salient propositions, and their interpretation is determined by discourse structure and contextual factors rather than syntactic structures alone. Second, Tagalog challenges the simple binary classification of languages as polarity-based or truth-based. Languages may employ multiple systems depending on contextual factors, and discourse orientation appears to be a key parameter determining this flexibility. This study provides detailed corpus evidence for the role of evidential and epistemic bias in answering systems, extending Kim's (2024) analysis to a typologically different language family (Austronesian). The obligatory echo system for certain predicate types (modals, existentials) suggests that answering strategies may be partially construction-specific, an observation with implications for construction-based approaches to grammar.

6.3 Implications for Philippine linguistics

This study contributes to Philippine linguistics in several ways. The study is the first detailed corpus-based study of Tagalog polar questions and answering strategies, addressing a gap noted since Schachter and Otañes (1972). Our findings provide a framework for comparative research on other Philippine languages (cf. Aquino 2024 on Cebuano; Fabregas 2024 on Asi). The study adds to evidence that Tagalog is a discourse-oriented language, with implications for analysis of other grammatical phenomena.

We note several limitations of this study. The t1TenTen corpus, while large, consists of web-crawled text that may not fully represent spoken Tagalog. Conversational corpora with richer contextual information would strengthen the analysis. Tagalog speakers frequently codeswitch with English. We excluded clear cases of code-switching, but subtle influences of English answering patterns cannot be ruled out. This study treats Tagalog as uniform, but regional and social variation in answering strategies likely exists and merits investigation.

6.4 Final remarks

This study has demonstrated that Tagalog employs a flexible, discourse-sensitive answering system that cannot be captured by simple binary typologies. Response particles *oo* and *hindi* function as anaphoric elements whose interpretation depends on discourse structure and contextual bias. These findings support recent discourse-based approaches to response particles (Kim 2024) and contribute to our understanding of cross-linguistic variation in answering systems.

The flexibility observed in Tagalog—and similar flexibility documented for Korean—suggests that many languages may employ multiple answering strategies depending on discourse context. This has implications for linguistic typology, suggesting that parameters of discourse orientation and contextual sensitivity may be more important than previously recognized in accounting for cross-linguistic variation.

References

- Aquino, Christine Jane. 2024. Polarity questions in Cebuano. In Nathaniel Oco, Shirley N. Dita, Ariane Macalinga Borlongan, and Jong-Bok Kim (eds.), *Proceedings of the 38th Pacific Asia Conference on Language, Information and Computation (PACLIC 38)*, 1080-1089. Seoul: Institute for the Study of Language and Information. Available at <http://isli.khu.ac.kr/paclic/pdfs/38/2024.paclic-1.130.pdf>.
- Bautista, Ma. Lourdes S. 2011. “Isn’t that interesting ‘no’” Some notes on ‘no’ in Philippine English. In Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista (ed.), *Studies of Philippine English: Exploring the Philippine component of the international corpus of English*, 75-89. Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc. for De La Salle University.
- Borlongan, Ariane M. 2008. Tag questions in Philippine English. *Philippine Journal of Linguistics* 39(1): 109-134.
- Dryer, Matthew S. 2013. Polar questions. In Matthew S. Dryer and Martin Haspelmath (eds.), *WALS Online (v2020.4)* [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13950591>.
- Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2023. *Ethnologue: Languages of the world (26th ed.)*. Dallas, TX: SIL International. <http://www.ethnologue.com>.
- Enfield, Nicholas J., Tanya Stivers, and Stephen C. Levinson (eds.). 2010. Question-response sequences in conversation across ten languages: An introduction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42(10): 2615-2619.
- Fabregas, Ivan Dolph F. 2024. Asking and answering Asi polar questions. *Philippine Journal*

- of *Linguistics* 55: 61-73.
- Ginzburg, Jonathan and Ivan A. Sag. 2000. *Interrogative investigations: The form, meaning and use of English interrogatives*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Go, Matthew Phillip and Nicco Nocon. 2017. Using Stanford part-of-speech tagger for the morphologically-rich Filipino language. In Rachel Edita Roxas (ed.), *Proceedings of the 31st Pacific Asia Conference on Language, Information and Computation (PACLIC 31)*, 81-88. Cebu City: The National University.
- Himmelmann, Nikolaus. 2005. Tagalog. In A. Adelaar and N. P. Himmelmann (eds.), *The Austronesian languages of Asia and Madagascar*, 350-376. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2013. The syntax of answers to polar questions in English and Swedish. *Lingua* 128: 31-50.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2016. *The syntax of yes and no*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, Bob Morris. 1999. *The Welsh answering system*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kim, Jong-Bok. 2017. On the anaphoric nature of particle responses to the polar questions in English and Korean. *Korean Journal of Linguistics* 42(2): 153-177.
- Kim, Jong-Bok. 2024. Parametric differences between English and Korean response particles: A discourse-based HPSG approach. *Studia Linguistica* 78(1): 1-35.
- König, Ekkehard and Peter Siemund. 2007. Speech act distinctions in grammar. In Timothy Shopen (ed.), *Language typology and syntactic description*, 276-324. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511619427.007>.
- Kramer, Ruth and Kyle Rawlins. 2011. Polarity particles: An ellipsis account. In Suzi Lima, Kevin Mullin, and Brian Smith (eds.), *Proceedings of the 39th Annual Meeting of the North East Linguistic Society*, 479-492. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.
- Krifka, Manfred. 2013. Response particles as propositional anaphors. In Todd Snider (ed.), *Proceedings of the 23rd Semantics and Linguistic Theory Conference*, 1-18. Boston, MA: Linguistic Society of America.
- Li, Charles and Sandra Thompson. 1976. Subject and topic: A new typology of language. In Charles Li (ed.), *Subject and topic*, 459-489. New York: Academic Press.
- Lim, Joo-Hyuk and Ariane M. Borlongan. 2011. Tagalog particles in Philippine English: The case of *ba*, *na*, 'no', and *pa*. *Philippine Journal of Linguistics* 42: 59-74.
- Moser, Elena V. 2018. *Answers to polarity questions: A typological study*. Master's Thesis. Stockholm University. Available at <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash-record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1219275>.
- Nagaya, Naonori. 2022. Beyond questions: Non-interrogative uses of *ano* 'what' in Tagalog. *Journal of Pragmatics* 190: 91-109. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.01.007>.
- Pope, Emily Norwood. 1976. *Questions and answers in English*. The Hague: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Roelofsen, Floris and Donka F. Farkas. 2015. Polarity particle responses as a window onto the interpretation of questions and assertions. *Language* 91(2): 359-414.
- Sadock, Jerrold M. and Arnold M. Zwicky. 1985. Speech act distinctions in syntax. In Timothy

Shopen (ed.), *Language typology and syntactic description*, vol. 1, 155-196. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schachter, Paul and Fe Otanes. 1972. *Tagalog reference grammar*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Westphal, Michael. 2020. Question tags in Philippine English. *Corpus Pragmatics* 4: 401-422.

Shirley N. Dita

Associate Professor

Department of English and Applied Linguistics

De La Salle University

2401 Taft Avenue

Manila 1004, Philippines

E-mail: shirley.dita@dlsu.edu.ph

Jong-Bok Kim

Professor

Department of English Linguistics and Literature

Kyung Hee University

26, Kyungheedaero-ro, Dongdaemun-gu,

Seoul, 02447, Korea

E-mail: jongbok@khu.ac.kr

Received: 2025. 10. 29.

Revised: 2025. 12. 26.

Accepted: 2025. 12. 29.