

# Polarity Questions in Cebuano

Christine Jane Aquino

Proceedings of the 38th Pacific Asia Conference on  
Language, Information and Computation (PACLIC 38)

Nathaniel Oco, Shirley N. Dita, Ariane Macalinga Borlongan, Jong-Bok Kim (eds.)

2024

© 2024. Christine Jane Aquino. Polarity Questions in Cebuano. In Nathaniel Oco, Shirley N. Dita, Ariane Macalinga Borlongan, Jong-Bok Kim (eds.), *Proceedings of the 38th Pacific Asia Conference on Language, Information and Computation* (PACLIC 38), 1332-1338. Institute for the Study of Language and Information, Kyung Hee University. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

# Polarity Questions in Cebuano

**Christine Jane Aquino**

University of the East-Calooocan

De La Salle University

christinejane.aquino@ue.edu.ph

## Abstract

Interlocutors utilize polarity questions in daily conversations to ascertain whether the proposition uttered is true or false. Despite its crucial role in communication, this has not received much attention in research, and Tanangkingsing's (2009) existing Cebuano references grammar. The current study addresses this gap by investigating how Cebuanos form and answer polar questions, such as the yes or no, existential, and confirmatory or tag questions, based on the conversations with five Cebuano native speakers and their group chat messages. The results show that yes-no questions and declarative sentences may have similar structures but differ in intonation. Such questions may be presented with the particle "*ba*." In addition, it can be answered using the double negative and double positive structures but not the negative-positive and positive-negative structures. The same is true for existential questions – they may follow the same structure of declarative sentences but differ in intonation. They may also appear with the particle "*ba*" in negative and positive existential questions. Similar to the yes-no question, the positive existential questions can be answered using the double negative (that starts with "*wa*," but not "*di*" or "*dili*") and double positive structures. However, Cebuanos do not answer them using the negative-positive and positive-negative structures. Meanwhile, they answer the negative existential questions using the double negative and positive-negative structures. On rare occasions, they answer it using the negative-positive structure, which can be formed with the interjection "*uy*." Further, the Cebuanos employ "*noh*" and "*di ba('t)*" in their confirmatory or tag questions. They usually place "*noh*" after the preposition and "*di*

*ba('t)*" in either position. Although *di* can be a short form of the word "*dili*," the latter cannot be utilized in this type of question; it is only used in dichotomous questions. While this study provides a basic description of how to form and answer polarity questions in Cebuano, it is worth noting that the results should be taken cautiously as these may vary depending on the context of the message, the common ground of the interlocutors, and prosody that contributes to the meaning of the message.

## 1 Introduction

Cebuano is a major Austronesian language belonging to the Bisayan language family under the Central Philippine of Malayo-Polynesian (Eberhard et al., 2024). Approximately 28.9 million people in the Philippines (NSO, 2020) speak this language. It is primarily used in Central Visayas, Eastern Negros, parts of Eastern Visayas, and much of Mindanao. As it is one of the most widely spoken languages in the Philippines, a wide array of topics on its grammar have been covered, which significantly contributed to the understanding of Austronesian languages.

One of the earliest studies on Cebuano is that of Bell (1976), which provided an in-depth examination of the structure and behavior of Cebuano subjects within transformational and relational grammar frameworks. The study examined the structure and behavior of Cebuano subjects within the transformational and relational grammar frameworks. The study presented the views of the previous investigators on the said topic. It also provided assumptions on the initial and final subjects in relational grammar. It discussed the rules for the initial and final subjects. It further demonstrated how the analysis could be extended to data from causative constructions and several ascension rules. The findings can help

advance understanding of Cebuano syntax within the two frameworks.

Sityar (2000) explored the topic and the y indefinite arguments in Cebuano, which are referential opposites. Sityar analyzed this using a structural account inspired by discourse configurational language analyses. Analyzing the syntactic and semantic properties of these and their discourse functions provided insights into the grammar and structure of the Cebuano language.

Additionally, Wolff (2001) wrote a paper highlighting Cebuano's history, origin, orthography, introductory phonology, morphology, and syntax. This work offers a broad and detailed description of the essential features of Cebuano, which serves as a fundamental reference for scholars studying it.

Years later, Tanangkingsing and Huang (2007) studied passive construction and offered a different view than previous studies exploring the same topic. They provided a detailed analysis of the syntactic and semantic properties of Cebuano passives and their discourse functions and pragmatic implications, which delivers new insights or interpretations that can better improve the understanding of Cebuano grammar.

This was followed by the development of Tanangkingsing's (2013) functional reference grammar of Cebuano, which significantly contributed to Cebuano grammar comprehension.

Further research in Cebuano language includes Caroro et al.'s (2020) work, which delved into the orthographic word parsing in Cebuano. The study also contributed to the field by identifying the grammar rules for hyphenated words, which helped enhance the understanding of Cebuano-Visayan discourse. This also provided implications for computational linguistics in developing language processing tools for Cebuano.

Tan-de Ramos (2021) analyzed the multidimensionality of pronominals in written discourse a year later. The study did a textual analysis to ascertain the position of pronouns in the clauses of the texts. The results show how Cebuano pronominals interact dynamically with the immediate morphological elements. The study may contribute to understanding Cebuano grammar and offer insights into the cultural and sociolinguistic aspects that influence pronoun choice in the discourse.

Finally, Tanangkingsing (2022) studied the pragmatic functions of *unsa* and the enclitics that

co-occur with it in a five 30-minute spoken discourse. The study demonstrated how this word functions as an interrogative pronoun, placeholder, and stance marker. The findings shed light on the multifunctionality of *unsa* and offer insights into how the speakers strategically convey meaning and manage discourse using linguistic elements.

While these foundational studies have greatly extended the understanding of Cebuano's grammatical structure and usage, they have focused mainly on syntax, discourse functions, and distinct grammatical phenomena. Despite these contributions, a vital facet of daily conversation in Cebuano, polarity questions, has not acquired the same level of scrutiny. Polarity questions, which include yes-no, existential, and confirmatory (tag) questions, play a key role in determining the truth value of propositions and guiding everyday interactions (König & Siemund, 2007).

Studying polarity questions in Cebuano is essential for several causes. First, it provides a better understanding of its syntactic and semantic structures. Second, it uncovers how Cebuanos manage discourse, convey meaning, and interact socially. Research on similar types of questions in other languages, such as Schachter and Otnes' (1972) work on Tagalog, stresses the more expansive linguistic importance of these forms. For example, Tagalog polarity questions use specific particles like "*noh*" and "*ba*," added to the negator "*hindi*," which also appears in Cebuano, suggesting possible shared features among Philippine languages. However, despite their value, polarity questions in Cebuano have not been examined, even in extensive works like Tanangkingsing's (2009) reference grammar.

This study addresses this gap by examining Cebuano's structure and usage of polarity questions. By analyzing authentic dialogues among native speakers, the research presents how yes-no, existential, and confirmatory questions are formed and answered. The findings extend existing knowledge of Cebuano grammar and offer helpful insights into the pragmatic points of language use, benefiting both linguists and language learners.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Research Design

The current study relies on conversations as its data to determine and describe the patterns in how Cebuanos form and answer polarity questions. The

qualitative research approach captures this research purpose. Qualitative research features a broad analysis of data, which can disclose inherent themes, meanings, patterns, and objectives that the quantitative approach might fail to notice (Clarke et al., 2019). In particular, the descriptive research design further embodies the goals of this study. A descriptive research design provides a comprehensive, precise, and systemic description of phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2023). This research design only describes the observed phenomenon and does not ascertain the relationships between variables. Hence, the study employs a qualitative research approach and descriptive research design as they catch the intended methods of the study to answer the following research question:

1. How do Cebuanos form and answer polar questions, such as the yes or no, existential, and confirmatory or tag questions?

## 2.2 Corpus

This study employs a corpus, a casual written conversation of five Cebuano native speakers in a group chat in a messaging app. The data only covers the messages from the group chat in the last quarter of 2023 (October-December), with more or less 450 minutes of conversation. These five group chat members are siblings, all females, ages 40, 48, 50, 54, and 56.

## 2.3 Data Gathering Procedure

### 2.3.1 Securing Informed Consent Forms

The researcher secures informed consent forms from the members of the group chat. The form includes the researcher's information, title, and purpose for the study. Moreover, the form discusses the risks, benefits, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

### 2.3.2 Sorting, Tabulating, and Grouping

The researcher transfers the downloaded data from the messaging app to Microsoft Word. The questions in the conversation are identified by using the find tool in the software and inputting the question mark. The questions found are copied and pasted in a separate file, together with the surrounding sentences, which the researcher interprets as responses to the questions appearing before them in the conversation. The questions and responses were then grouped as yes or no,

existential, and confirmatory or tag based on Schacter and Otnes' (1972) description of these questions in their Tagalog Reference Grammar. The data was then grouped to identify patterns and themes quickly.

### 2.3.3 Data Handling, Retention, and Disposal

The researcher abides by the Data Privacy Act of 2012, ethical guidelines, and legal requirements to safeguard the informants' privacy. Moreover, the researcher collects, organizes, and keeps data carefully to guarantee its accuracy and confidentiality. Further, the researcher ensures that the data gathered from the participants is only used for this study alone.

The data is saved in a password-protected folder for a year. This will be deleted upon the completion of the study.

## 2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis is guided by Schacter and Otnes' (1972) description of yes or no, existential, and confirmatory or tag questions. The researcher analyzes the data manually to identify the themes and patterns in how Cebuanos form and answer the identified types of polar questions. Their structures are compared to the construction of declarative sentences. The common particles, interjections, and (non)existential words employed when constructing and answering such polar questions are also identified. Subsequently, the results were counterchecked by conducting an in-person conversation with one of the members of the group chat from which the data was taken.

## 3 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Yes-No

Consistent with Schacter and Otnes' (1972) discussion of yes-no questions in Tagalog, the results show that yes-no questions (1) and declarative sentences (2) in Cebuano may have similar structures but differ in intonation. Such questions may be presented with the particle "*ba*," as in:

- (1) *Manlakaw (ba) ta?*  
Will go out PAR ABS.1pi  
'Are we going out?'
- (2) *Manlakaw ta.*  
Will go out ABS.1pi  
'We will go out.'

These insights into language structure and semantics explain how intonation and specific linguistic particles, such as “*ba*” in Cebuano, play pivotal roles in delineating questions from statements despite their syntactical similarities. The particle “*ba*” signals that the sentence is a question, a common trait in various Philippine languages (Reid, 1970), which is also observed in studies on Austronesian languages (Blust, 2013). Essentially, “*ba*” in Cebuano fits into the regional pattern seen in languages across this region.

The same phenomenon is observed in Indonesian, an Austronesian language like Cebuano and Tagalog, where yes-no questions and declarative sentences can be formed similarly and are distinguished only by intonation (Sneddon et al., 2012). This phenomenon may suggest a possible historical and linguistic relationship that can be further explored with other languages.

When examining how Cebuanos respond to this type of question, the research highlights two distinct patterns to express their thoughts clearly: the double negative (3) and double positive (4) structures, as in:

(3) *Di(li). Di(li) ta manlakaw.*  
NEG NEG ABS.1pi will go out  
‘We will not go out.’

(4) *O. Manlakaw ta.*  
Yes will go out ABS.1pi  
‘Yes. We will go out.’

But not the negative-positive (5) and positive-negative (6) structures, as in:

(5) *Di(li). Manlakaw ta.*  
NEG will go out ABS.1pi  
‘No. We will go out.’

(6) *O. Di(li) ta manlakaw.*  
Yes. NEG ABS.1pi will go out  
‘Yes. We will not go out.’

This observation highlights how people consistently use double positive or negative language structures instead of mixing them to keep their communication logical and clear. This insight is consistent with Krifka’s (2013) study, which found consistency is critical to ensuring clarity and understanding when answering questions. This

concept is similar to the rule of polarity agreement in the German language (König & Siemund, 2007), where speakers stick to either a yes or no response without mixing the two to avoid confusion. This preference for clear, straightforward answers can be traced back to a natural tendency in human cognition to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding in conversations (Geurts, 2003).

### 3.2 Existential

Still congruous with Schacter and Otnes’ (1972) discussion of existential questions in Tagalog, positive existential questions in Cebuano (7) also follow the same structure of declarative sentences (8) but differ in intonation. They may also appear with the particle “*ba*,” as in:

(7) *Naa (ba) kay kwarta?*  
EXI PAR ABS.2s money  
‘Do you have money?’

(8) *Naa kay kwarta.*  
EXI ABS.2s money  
‘You have money.’

The same is true with the negative existential questions (9) and its equivalent declarative sentence (10), as in:

(9) *Wa (ba) kay kwarta?*  
EXI.NEG PAR ABS.2s money  
‘Do you not have money?’

(10) *Wa kay kwarta.*  
EXI.NEG ABS.2s money  
‘You do not have money.’

Extending the same observation from yes-no questions to existential questions further strengthens the importance of the particle “*ba*” and intonation in distinguishing yes-no questions from statements in Cebuano. The change in intonation to signal interrogativity is also consistent in the Indonesian language (Sneddon et al., 2010) and Javanese (Ogloblin, 2005). This observation emphasizes the potential for a cross-linguistic analysis that could reveal universal patterns or principles governing question formation, which may deepen the understanding of human language processing and its cognitive underpinnings.

Similar to the yes-no question, Cebuanos answer the positive existential questions using the double negative structure that starts with “*wa*” (11) and double positive structure (12), as in:

(11) *Wa. Wa koy kwarta.*  
EXI.NEG EXI.NEG ABS.1s money  
‘I do not have. I do not have money.’

(12) *Naa. Naa koy kwarta.*  
EXI EXI ABS.1s money  
‘I have. I have money.’

but they do not answer this using the double negative structure (13) that starts with “*di*” or “*dili*,” as in:

(13) *Di(li). Wa koy kwarta.*  
NEG EXI.NEG ABS.1s money  
‘No. I do not have money.’

This is logical as the translation of “*di*” is no or not, which may be more appropriate for yes-no questions than existential ones.

Also, they do not answer it using the negative-positive (14) and positive-negative (15) structures, as in:

(14) *Wa. Naa koy kwarta.*  
EXI.NEG EXI ABS.1s money  
‘None. I have money.’

(15) *Naa. Wa koy kwarta.*  
EXI EXI.NEG ABS.1s money  
‘I have. I do not have money.’

Meanwhile, they answer the negative existential questions using the double negative (16) and positive-negative (17) structures, as in:

(16) *Wa. Wa koy kwarta.*  
EXI.NEG EXI.NEG ABS.1s money  
‘None. I do not have money.’

(17) *O. Wa koy kwarta.*  
Yes EXI.NEG ABS.1s money  
‘Yes. I do not have money.’

The identical patterns in the way Cebuanos answer yes-no and existential questions demonstrate their desire to keep the communication rational and unambiguous. This

observation further supports Krifka’s (2013) study, which can be a natural in human cognition to avoid ambiguity in messages (Geurts, 2003).

On rare occasions, they answer the negative existential question using the negative-positive structure (18) and can be formed with the interjection “*uy*,” as in:

(18) *Dili (uy). Naa koy kwarta.*  
NEG hey EXI. ABS.1s money  
‘Hey, no. I have money.’

The response pattern using interjection “*uy*” suggests an emotional or emphatic nuance. This indicates feeling surprised, which may make the person answer with strong negation of the statement mentioned. The same observation is seen in other Philippine languages, where interjections are used to express disbelief or reinforce assertions (Reid, 1993). This is also observed in other Austronesian languages like Malay and Indonesian, where interjections like “*loh*” and “*kan*” depict mild surprise or emphasis (Gil, 2002). This suggests a broader regional pattern where interjections are integral in managing interpersonal dynamics and conversational flow.

### 3.3 Confirmatory or Tag

Cebuanos employ “*noh*” and “*di ba(‘t)*” in the confirmatory or tag questions. They usually place “*noh?*” at the end (19), as in:

(19) *Ulit sya, noh?*  
Gluttonous ABS.3s PAR  
‘(S)he is gluttonous, right?’

And *di ba(‘t)* in either position (20, 21), as in:

(20) *Di ba(‘t) ulit sya?*  
NEG PAR gluttonous ABS.3s  
‘Isn’t (s)he gluttonous?’

(21) *Ulit sya, di ba?*  
Gluttonous ABS.3s NEG PAR  
‘(S)he is gluttonous, isn’t (s)he?’

This is the same with Tagalog construction of confirmatory or tag questions in which they follow different formulas (Schacter & Otones, 1972) – “*ano*” can be placed after the proposition while “*di ba*” in either position.

Although “*di*” can be a short form of the word “*dili*,” the latter cannot be utilized in confirmatory or tag questions, as in:

- (22) *Ulit*            *sya,*        *dili*        *ba?*  
 Gluttonous ABS.3s NEG PAR  
 ‘(S)he is gluttonous, isn’t (s)he?’

Instead, “*dili*” can be used in dichotomous questions, as in:

- (23) *Ulit*            *sya?*        *Dili?*  
 Gluttonous ABS.3s NEG  
 ‘Is (s)he gluttonous or not?’

- (24) *Ulit*            *sya*        *o*        *Dili?*  
 Gluttonous ABS.3s or NEG  
 ‘Is (s)he gluttonous or not?’

Despite the fact that “*di*” is a short form of “*dili*,” which translates to no or not in English, the findings show that their usage differs depending on the question type. The data shows that “*dili*” is not usually used for confirmatory or tag questions as “*noh*” and “*di ba*” are more appropriate. The data further shows that “*dili*” is more appropriate for dichotomous questions that have two contrasting options as seen in examples (23) and (24). This shows an added layer of complexity in the usage of Cebuano words negative marker, “*dili*.”

## 4 Conclusion

The current study extends Tanangkingsing’s (2009) functional reference grammar of Cebuano by providing additional descriptions of how Cebuanos form and answer polarity questions, such as the yes or no, existential, and confirmatory or tag questions.

These findings can help linguists and researchers better understand Cebuano’s grammatical structures and rules, contributing to the language’s overall knowledge. The results also shed light on the pragmatic aspects of Cebuano language use, which can inform language learners outside of the culture. Finally, this may help teachers design better language learning materials for the Mother Tongue Based-Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) curriculum and strategies for learners of Cebuano as a second language.

Although this provides a basic description of how to form and answer polarity questions in Cebuano, it is worth noting that the results should be taken cautiously as these may vary depending

on the context of the message, the common ground of the interlocutors, and prosody that contributes to the meaning of the message.

Future researchers can include more discourse types in the corpus and investigate whether the initial findings in this study will be consistent despite the different contexts.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the informants of this study who graciously allowed access to their group chat, enabling the documentation and analysis of their mother tongue.

Furthermore, I am profoundly grateful to Dr. Shirley Dita for her invaluable encouragement and for motivating us to investigate polarity questions across various languages.

## References

- Bell, S. J. (1976). *Cebuano subjects in two frameworks* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation], Massachusetts Institute of Technology).
- Blust, R. (2013). The Austronesian languages (revised edition). *Canberra: ANU-Asia Pacific Linguistics*.
- Caroro, R. A., Paredes, R. K., & Lumasag, J. M. (2020). Rules for orthographic word parsing of the Philippines' Cebuano-Visayan language using context-free grammars. *International Journal of Software Science and Computational Intelligence (IJSSCI)*, 12(2), 34-49.
- Clarke, V., Braun, V., Frith, H., & Moller, N. (2019). Editorial introduction to the special issue: Using story completion methods in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(1), 1-20.
- Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2024). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (27th ed.). SIL International.
- Geurts, B. (2003). Reasoning with quantifiers. *Cognition*, 86(3), 223-251.
- Gil, D. (1994). The structure of Riau Indonesian. *Nordic Journal of Linguistics*, 17(2), 179-200.
- König, E., & Siemund, P. (2007). Speech act distinctions in grammar. *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, 1, 276-324.
- Krifka, M. (2013, August). Response particles as propositional anaphors. In *Semantics and linguistic theory* (pp. 1-18).
- Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2023). *Practical research: Planning and design*. Pearson.

- National Statistics Office. (2020). 2020 Census of population and housing, report no. 2A – demographic and housing characteristics (Non-sample variables). [https://psa.gov.ph/system/files/main-publication/2020\\_PHILIPPINES\\_FINAL%2520PDF.pdf](https://psa.gov.ph/system/files/main-publication/2020_PHILIPPINES_FINAL%2520PDF.pdf)
- Ogloblin, A. K. 2005. ‘Javanese’. In A. Adelaar & N. P. Himmelmann (eds.) *The Austronesian Languages of Asia and Madagascar*, 590-624. London: Routledge.
- Reid, L. A. (1970). Central Bontoc: Sentence, paragraph and discourse.
- Schachter, P. & Otnes, F. T. (1972). *Tagalog reference grammar*. University of California Press.
- Sityar, E. (2000). The topic and y indefinite in Cebuano. In *Formal Issues in Austronesian Linguistics* (pp. 145-165). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Sneddon, J. N., Adelaar, K. A., Djenar, D., & Ewing, M. (2012). *Indonesian: A comprehensive grammar*. Routledge.
- Tanangkingsing, M., & Huang, S. (2007). Cebuano passives revisited. *Oceanic Linguistics*, 554-584.
- Tanangkingsing, M. (2009). *A functional reference grammar of Cebuano*. Taipei, Taiwan: National Taiwan University dissertation.
- Tanangkingsing, M. (2013). A study of second-position enclitics in Cebuano. *Oceanic Linguistics*, 222-248.
- Tanangkingsing, M. (2022). Pragmatic functions of versatile *unsa* ‘what’ in Cebuano: From interrogative pronoun to placeholder to stance marker. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 193, 59-75.
- Tan-de Ramos, J. (2021). The multidimensionality of Cebuano pronominals-avenues for a qualitative investigation. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 9(4), 221.
- Wolff, J. U. (2001). Cebuano. *Facts about the world's languages: An encyclopedia of the World's major languages, past and present*, 121-2