

Documentation and description of sounds and grammar of Higaonon spoken in Opol, Misamis Oriental

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Abstract: Higaonon [mba], spoken by an estimated 452,000 people in north-central Mindanao, remains undocumented despite its vitality as a ‘developing language.’ The present study addresses this gap by documenting the Opol variety in Misamis Oriental through a descriptive analysis of its phonology, morphology, and syntax. Data collected from tribal leaders using elicited words and sentence lists reveal a system comprising 16 consonant phonemes, five vowels, and phonemic stress. Lexical items are categorized as open classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) and closed classes (pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and linker). In alignment with other Philippine languages, Higaonon exhibits predicate-initial word order and includes both verbal and non-verbal sentence types. By contextualizing these findings with previous orthographic work by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (2023), which documented vowel variation among Higaonon communities in Bukidnon, Agusan, and Misamis Oriental, the study highlights both convergence and divergence within the language. The description of the Opol variety complements earlier orthographic observations and establishes a foundation for comparative dialectological research across Mindanao. In addition to its linguistic significance, the study supports cultural preservation, addresses prejudice against Indigenous Peoples, and serves as a resource for Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE).

Keywords: *Higaonon, Philippine language, phonology, morphology, syntax*



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INTRODUCTION

As one of Asia’s multicultural countries, the Philippines is considered the home to many ethnolinguistic communities with distinct languages. According to McFarland (2004, p. 59), there are more than 100 languages in the Philippines, while Zorc et al. (2023) mentioned 179 living and indigenous languages. However, Eberhard et al. (2024) reported that the country has now 186 established languages – 184 of these are living and two (2) are identified as dead. Amongst the living languages, 175 are indigenous and nine (9) are non-indigenous. One of the living and indigenous languages in the Philippines is the Higaonon language.

Higaonon [ISO 639-3 mba] is a language spoken in Southern Philippines, particularly in the north-central regions of Mindanao. Based on the data from Eberhard et al. (2024), native speakers of Higaonon are located in the Province of Agusan del Norte, south of Butuan City, in the northwest part of Agusan del Sur Province, and in Northern Mindanao. In addition, according to their report, the Higaonon language has alternate names – *Higaonon Manobo*, *Hinigaunon*, and *Misamis Higaonon Manobo*. As reported, Higaonon is related

to the Binukid language [bkd] with 77 to 81% intelligibility. Moreover, the Ethnologue (n.d.) stated that Higaonon is one of the developing Philippine languages. In 2020, it had an ethnic population of 452,000.

Although stable, there is a need to preserve and protect the Higaonon language from being threatened due to the increasing number of migrant-settlers in their area, whom they call ‘Dumagat.’ With the presence of more prestigious and dominant languages such as English, Tagalog, and Cebuano in the locale, it is not far that Higaonon will be among those indigenous languages which will be displaced in the future given that the Philippines has been identified by the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages as one of the language hotspots in the world (Living Tongues, Institute for Endangered Languages, n.d.). This means that its wealth of languages is being lost at a rate faster than it can be adequately documented. At present, there are 44 languages in the Philippines considered in trouble, and 11 are dying (Eberhard et al., 2024), and many of these languages are spoken by the Indigenous Peoples in the country.

As documented by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003, p. 2), the extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical, and ecological knowledge because each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world. The document explains that when a language dies, speakers may lose their cultural identity and without adequate documentation, an extinct language can never be revived.

Contextualizing these, in order to protect the Higaonon language from becoming endangered or extinct, it is imperative that it be preserved in written form. To do so, comprehensive grammars, dictionaries, orthography, and pedagogical materials in the Higaonon language should be written. Thus, this research project is conceptualized as a response to the need to preserve the language in written form before it disappears without the speakers knowing it.

There is a study on the orthography of Higaonon made by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (2023), the Philippines’ primary agency on its languages in 2023. The study’s area included the Higaonon language spoken in different areas of Mindanao, such as Bukidnon, Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur, Cagayan de Oro, and some municipalities of Misamis Oriental like Claveria, Magsaysay, and El Salvador. Results from the study show that the vowel phonemes of Bukidnon and Misamis-Oriental Claveria differ from the vowel phonemes of other mentioned locales. However, there have been no linguistic studies that comprehensively analyze the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the Higaonon language, specifically the Higaonon that is spoken in Opol, Misamis Oriental. Therefore, this current study addresses this gap.

The main objective of this study is to describe the sounds and grammar of the Higaonon language spoken in Opol, Misamis Oriental. It spe-

cifically analyzes the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the language. In analyzing the phonology, this study intends to describe the segmental phonemes and suprasegmental features Higaonon as well as its syllable structure. Meanwhile, in analyzing the morphology of the language, this study aspires to discuss the different morphemes of the language and its lexical categories. In analyzing Higaonon's syntax, this study aims to describe its basic sentence structure and kinds of sentences. This study does not adopt a formal theoretical framework; rather, it is oriented toward language documentation and preservation. Some of the terminology employed (e.g., *agent focus*, *patient focus*, *argument markers*) reflects established usage in Austronesian typological traditions. These terms are used here in a descriptive sense to refer to alignment patterns characteristic of Philippine-type languages (see Reid & Liao 2004; Himmelmann 2005). By situating the analysis within these descriptive conventions, the study ensures accessibility both to linguists familiar with Philippine-type alignment and to those approaching the language from a documentation perspective.

The descriptive orientation of this research aligns with its primary aim: to contribute to the preservation of the Higaonon language by providing a systematic account of its phonology, morphology, and syntax. Rather than engaging in theoretical debates, the analysis addresses gaps in prior research and adds to the limited body of work on Higaonon grammar. In this way, the study underscores the importance of descriptive linguistics as a foundation for language documentation and revitalization efforts.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive approach in documenting and describing a language. All the primary data in this study were gathered through personal interviews with the language informants. Eliciting materials composed of word lists and list of sentences are the main instruments for data collection. Crafting of the eliciting material is based on Swadesh's wordlist and Abingosa's (2021) eliciting materials used in her study. Aikhenvald's (2015) book, *The Art of Grammar*, is also used as a guide in the writing of Higaonon grammar.

In analyzing the phonological features of the language, the recorded data were transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet, and to validate and maintain its reliability, focus group discussions and community meetings were held from March to December 2024. In total, there were five key informants in the study. They were mostly tribal leaders, and they were selected based on the following criteria: (1) native speakers of Higaonon; (2) born and raised in the locale of the study; (3) 50 years old and above; (4) able to read and write; and (5) understand Cebuano or Tagalog language. Part of the agreement with the community is only to have their tribal leaders as the informants of the study; as such, this is a limitation of the study.

As one of the indigenous languages spoken by an Indigenous Peoples

(IPs) group in the country, studying the Higaonon language requires approval from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). Thus, part of the methodology is the compliance with the NCIP Administrative Order No. 1 Series of 2012, otherwise known as the *‘Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) and Customary Laws (CLs) Research and Guidelines of 2012.’* Also, prior to the data collection, the researchers complied with the procedures stipulated in the NCIP Administrative Order No. 3, S. of 2012, also known as the *Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and other related processes.*

The study was conducted in Opol for several considerations. First, there is a large number of language informants in the area; second, the Higaonon language spoken in the locale remains undocumented; and lastly, the Higaonon communities in Opol have requested for such documentation.

The history and demographic information provided by the Office of the Municipal Planning and Development Coordinator of Opol shows that this municipality is one of the twenty-three (23) municipalities in the Province of Misamis Oriental, Northern Mindanao. It has a geographic coordinate of 8°31’ 0” N, 124°34’ 0” E. Based on the 2020 census of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA, 2020), the population of Opol has reached 66,327. The Municipality of Opol was created from the barrios of Opol, Igpit, and Lower Iponan, formerly part of Cagayan de Oro, by virtue of Republic Act No. 524, approved June 15, 1950. This municipality is gradually becoming more urbanized, as a result of local population growth and the expansion of nearby Cagayan de Oro City. Historically, Opol was a more rural area focused on agriculture and fishing. The subdivision of rural land for new residential housing is a matter of some controversy amongst locals.

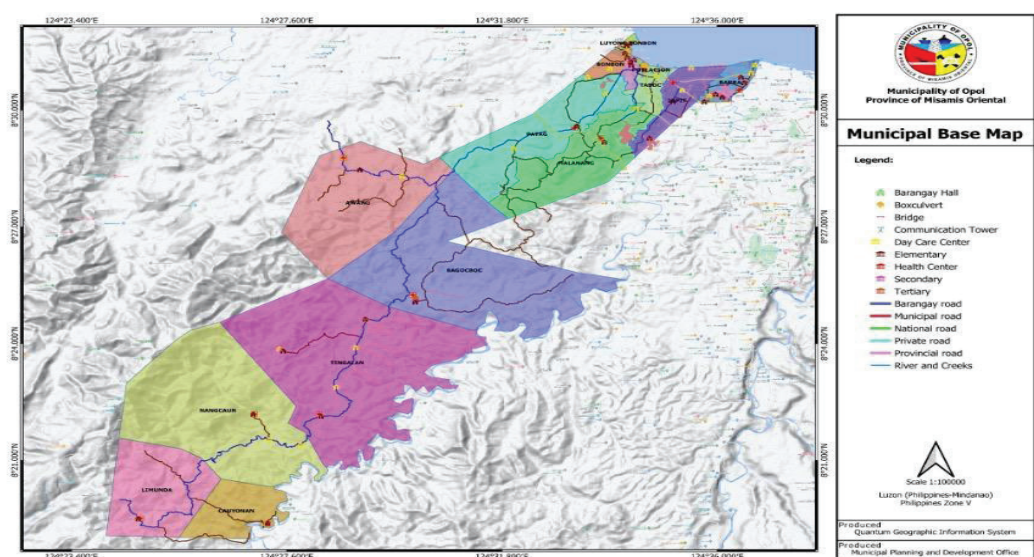


Figure 1. *Administrative Map of Opol, Misamis Oriental, Philippines*

While the research setting is the larger Municipality of Opol, the focus of the study is the Dulangan Unified Ancestral Domain, which includes six (6) hinterland barangays of Awang, Bagoceboc, Cauyonan, Limonda, Nangcaon, and Tingalan. These barangays are predominantly inhabited by the Higaonon tribe, who constitute 15% (9,942) of the entire population in Opol. Presented in Figure 1 is the Administrative Map of Opol, Misamis Oriental.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part contains a brief description of the phonology, morphology and syntax of the Higaonon language.

Phonology

The phonology of a language consists of two parts – the segmental sounds and suprasegmental, as well as the phonotactics (Endriga & San Juan, 2018, p.8). The segmental part consists of the inventory of the consonants and vowels, while the suprasegmental part includes stress, tone, and intonation. In this part, the inventory of consonants and vowels, as well as word stress is discussed.

Consonants

Table 1 shows the phonemic inventory of the Higaonon consonants. The phonemes are grouped according to the manner and point of articulation. There are sixteen (16) consonant phonemes in Higaonon – seven (7) stops, two (2) fricatives, three (3) nasals, two (2) liquids, and two (2) glides.

Table 1. Phonemic Chart of Higaonon Consonants

MANNER OF ARTICULATION		POINT OF ARTICULATION					
		Dental	Alveolar	Alveopalatal	Velar	Glottal	
Stop	voiceless	p	t			k	ʔ
	voiced	b	d			g	
Fricative	voiceless			s			h
Nasal	voiced	m		n		ŋ	
Liquid	voiced			l			
		Lateral					
	Tap			r			
Glide	voiced	w				j	

Stops

The Higaonon language has seven (7) stops – two (2) bilabial stops, two (2) dental stops, two (2) velar stops, and one (1) glottal stop. As shown in the examples below, all the consonant stops of Higaonon may appear at the onset or coda of a syllable. The onset and coda may be found at the beginning or end of a nucleus vowel (Laranjo, 2017, p. 63).

Onset

/’ pu .soŋ/	‘heart’
/’ ba .’la.ŋol/	‘string beans’
/’ tun .’loʔ/	‘finger’
/’ da .lid/	‘root of a big tree’
/’ ka .ju/	‘tree’
/’ gu .tək/	‘stomach’
/’ʔa.li.ma/	‘hand’

Coda

/’ga.ʔ up /	‘village’
/’ʔa.lə b /	‘knee’
/’laŋ.g it /	‘human or animal skin’
/’bə.l ad /	‘shoulder’
/’bak.b ak /	‘frog’
/’li.ʔə g /	‘neck’
/so.’daʔ/	‘fish’

Fricatives

Higaonon has two (2) fricatives – the alveolar fricative /s/ and the glottal fricative /h/. Examples below show that the consonant /s/ may appear at the onset or coda of a syllable, while the consonant /h/ appears only at the onset of a syllable.

Onset

/’ sa .’bu.wa/	‘one’
/’ h ag.pa/	‘grass’

Coda

/’tag. bis /	‘bird’
/la.’ʔ as /	‘old’

Nasals

There are three (3) nasal consonants in Higaonon. These are the bilabial nasal /m/, the alveolar nasal /n/, and the velar nasal /ŋ/. All three nasal consonants may appear at the onset or coda of a syllable, as shown in the examples.

Onset

/’ ma .nok/	‘chicken’
/da.’ naw /	‘lake’
/’ ŋi .pən/	‘tooth’

Coda

/ʔi.kam/	‘mat’
/ʔa.lan/	‘all’
/ku.din/	‘cat’

Liquid

Higaonon has two (2) liquid consonants – the lateral /l/ and tap /r/. As shown in the examples, a lateral consonant appears at the onset or coda of a syllable while a tap consonant appears only at the onset of a syllable.

Onset

/ʔla.li.ma/	‘five’
/su.lə/	‘light’
/ka.ba.rin/	‘round bitter gourd’

Coda

/ma.du.ʔəl/	‘dull’
/tə.ŋəl/	‘nape’

Glides

The Higaonon language consists of two (2) glide consonants – a bilabial glide /w/ and an alveopalatal glide /j/. These consonants may appear at the onset or coda of a syllable.

Onset

/ʔwa.lu/	‘eight’
/ʔa.ti.jo/	‘small’

Coda

/ʔu.təw/	‘human’
/ʔa.maj/	‘father’

Vowels

The Higaonon language is among those Philippine languages that has five (5) vowel phonemes. Table 2 shows that Higaonon has one (1) front vowel, two (2) central vowels, and two (2) back vowels.

Table 2. Phonemic Chart of Higaonon Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid		ə	o
Low		a	

/i/: high-front vowel

The vowel /i/ of Higaonon is realized as [i] – a high-front unrounded vowel. Examples below show the distribution of /i/ as the nucleus of an open syllable (CV) and as the nucleus of a closed syllable (CVC).

Open Syllable

Initial	/ʔi.duŋ/	‘nose’
Medial	/ta.ŋi.la/	‘ear’
Final	/sa.ʔi/	‘this’

Closed Syllable

Initial	/biŋ.ga.ŋla/	‘cassava’
Medial	/ʔa.ŋi.ŋiŋ.kiŋ/	‘little finger’
Final	/ʔwa.hiŋ/	‘water’

Data show that vowel phoneme /i/ has an allophone – the vowel [e]. As shown in the examples, this vowel can only be a nucleus of an open syllable, which can be found at the final position of a word.

Open Syllable

Final	/ʔba.he/	‘woman’
	/ʔba.ʔe/	‘rank’

/ə/: mid-central vowel

The mid-central vowel [ə] of Higaonon is realized as [ə]. Presented below is the distribution of /ə/ as the nucleus of an open syllable and a closed syllable. Based on the data gathered, this vowel can only be a nucleus of a closed syllable found in the initial and final positions of a word.

Open Syllable

Initial	/bə.ʔlad/	‘shoulder’
Medial	/ba.ʔkə.ləŋ/	‘esophagus’
Final	/ʔlu.tə/	‘cooked rice’

Closed Syllable

Initial	/ʔbəl.bəl/	‘feather’
Final	/ʔli.sən/	‘leg’

/a/: central vowel

The central vowel /a/ of Higaonon is realized as [a]. The distribution of this vowel is presented below. Data shows that vowel /a/ can be the nucleus of open and closed syllables.

Open Syllable

Initial	/ˈpa.lu/	‘heel’
Medial	/ma.ˈla.las/	‘spicy’
Final	/ˈla.ga/	‘maiden’

Closed Syllable

Initial	/tʌm.pəd/	‘cut’
Medial	/ma.ˈhʌg.kap/	‘light’
Final	/la.ˈʔas/	‘old’

/u/: high-back vowel

The high-back rounded vowel /u/ of Higaonon is realized as [u]. Examples below show the distribution of this vowel – vowel /u/ can be a nucleus of an open syllable and of a closed syllable.

Open Syllable

Initial	/ˈʔu.ləd/	‘worm’
Medial	/ta.tu.ˈlu/	‘three’
Final	/ˈpi.tu/	‘seven’

Closed Syllable

Initial	/ˈbug.ta/	‘soil/land’
Medial	/bi.nuŋ.ˈga.nan/	‘wrapped in leaves’
Final	/ˈtu.kud/	‘pillar’

/o/: mid-back vowel

Higaonon’s mid-back rounded vowel /o/ can be realized as [o]. This vowel can be a nucleus of an open syllable and a closed syllable. Data shows that /o/ can only be a nucleus of a closed syllable found in the initial and final positions of a word.

Open Syllable

Initial	/so.ˈdaʔ/	‘viand’
Medial	/ma.ˈʔo.mis/	‘sweet’
Final	/ʔa.ti.ˈjo/	‘small’

Closed Syllable

Initial	/lok.lo.ˈko.nan/	‘knee pit’
Final	/ma.pə.ˈdos/	‘sour’

Diphthong

Diphthong refers to the sound formed by the combination of a vowel and a glide (Cruz & Piedad, 2021, p. 42). The vowel phoneme is the nucleus of the syllable, while the consonant glide is the coda of the syllable. Based on

the gathered data, there are four (4) diphthongs in Higaonon – the /aj/, /uj/, /aw/, and /əw/.

Table 3. Diphthongs in Higaonon

Diphthong		Examples	
/aj/	kilay	/’ki.laj/	‘eyebrow’
	inay	/’ʔi.naj/	‘mother’
	amay	/’ʔa.maj/	‘father’
/uj/	kuy	/’kuj/	‘we’
	minulaguy	/mi.nu.’la.guj/	‘run’
/aw/	ambaw	/’ʔam.baw/	‘rat’
	umaw	/ʔu.’maw/	‘mute’
/əw/	utəw	/ʔu.’təw/	‘human’

Word Stress

Stress refers to the emphasis given to a particular syllable. The loudness of a syllable characterizes it. The symbol [’] is used in this study as a symbol for stress. This symbol is placed before the stressed syllable. As shown in the examples below, word or lexical stress in Higaonon is phonemic. When the placement of the stress changes, the meaning of the word also changes.

[’sa.la]	‘punishment’
[sa.’la]	‘sin’
[’su.ləd]	‘sibling’
[su.’ləd]	‘inside’

Meanwhile, stress is placed on the ultimate or penultimate syllable of Higaonon words.

Stress on the ultimate syllable

[tun.’lɔ]	‘finger’
[tə.’ŋəl]	‘nape’
[pi.’lək]	‘eyelash’
[ku.’diŋ]	‘cat’

Stress on the penultimate syllable

[’ba.he]	‘woman’
[’ka.ʔən]	‘eat’
[’kag.pa]	‘chest’
[’su.lɔ]	‘fingernail’

Morphology

Higaonon words can be categorized as open or closed classes. Open classes are groups of words that are potentially expandable, while closed

classes refer to words whose membership is said to be restricted (Aikhenvald, 2015).

Open Classes

The open classes include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. These lexical categories are so-called open classes because new words or lexicon can be added to these through lexical inflection and derivation.

Nouns

Nouns can be distinguished from other open classes through their roots and the affixes associated with them (Molina, 2021, p.69). Nouns in Higaonon can be categorized as root or with affixes. Presented below are examples of unaffixed and with affixed nouns in Higaonon.

Root:	alima	‘hand’
	anlaw	‘sun’
With Affix:	paglimbay	‘singing’
	pagiyap	‘counting’

Igno and Perez (2018) explained that the process of adding an affix to a root or stem is one of the common morphological processes. In Higaonon, nominal affixes such as **-an**, **pag-**, **ka-**, **ting-**, and **ka-...-an** are attached to a word to form nouns.

a. **-an** : attached to a verb to indicate the object used to perform the action referred to by the verb root.

alo alo + **-an** > alo aloan ‘toy’

b. **pag-** : a nominalizing affix attached to verbs to indicate the name of the action referred to by the verb root.

pag- + limbay > paglimbay ‘singing’

c. **ka-** : a nominal affix attached to a verb root to indicate the companion of the agent performing the action referred by the verb.

ka- + alo alo > kaalo alo ‘playmate’

d. **ting-** : affix attached to nouns to indicate a season or period.

ting- + **lati** > **tinglati** ‘summer’

e. **ka-...-an** : attaches to a noun to indicate the name of the larger entity referred to by the noun root.

ka- + **wahig** + **-an** > **kawahigan** ‘waters’

Noun phrases in Philippine languages are typically composed of a noun preceded by an article traditionally called nominal markers (Gallego, 2015, p. 65). In Higaonon, there are two (2) types of nominal markers used to mark nouns – the argument markers and plural markers. Argument markers are categorized as focus and non-focus argument markers.

The focus argument markers (FM) refer to the types of nominal markers used to mark the focused argument in a clause. These correspond to what is often labeled *nominative* in Philippine-type languages, but in this study the abbreviation **FM** is used consistently. In marking plurality in proper nouns, *sidan ki* is used to mark focused arguments, while *hay* is used to mark non-focused arguments. For clarity, the following abbreviations are employed in glosses:

Table 4. Nominal markers in Higaonon

Abbreviation	Marker(s)	Meaning
FM	<i>su, si, sidan ki</i>	Focus Marker (marks focused NP)
NFM	<i>hu, hi, hay</i>	Non-Focus Marker (marks non-focused NP)
PL	<i>manga</i>	Plural Marker
OBL	<i>ta, ki</i>	Oblique Marker (marks peripheral arguments)

(1) Minulaguy **su** bata
 AF-PERF.run FM child
 ‘The child ran.’

(2) Minulaguy **si** Pedro
 AF-PERF.run FM Pedro
 ‘Pedro ran.’

The non-focus argument (NFM) refers to the argument that is not chosen by the verb to be focused, which is marked by nominal markers **hu** and **hi** in Higaonon.

(3) Minalit **hu** timus su bata
 AF-PERF.buy NFM salt FM child
 ‘The child bought salt.’

- (4) Tinampəd **hi** Ben su kayu
 PF-PERF.cut NFM Ben FM tree
 ‘Ben cut the tree.’

Oblique markers (OBL) are used to mark non-core arguments or the so-called peripheral arguments referring to place, time, instrument, and beneficiary.

- (5) Suminabay su bata **ta** wahig
 AF-PERF.jump FM bata OBL river
 ‘The child jumped into the river.’

- (6) Nanumbalay si Ben **ki** Fe gabia
 AF-PERF.visit FM Ben OBL Fe yesterday
 ‘Ben visited Fe yesterday.’

The plural marker **manga** is used in Higaonon in marking plurality in common noun focused and non-focused arguments, as well as in peripheral arguments. This marker occurs after the FM, NFM, and OBL markers.

- (7) Suminayaw su **manga** bata gabia
 AF-PERF.dance FM Pl child yesterday
 ‘The children danced yesterday.’

- (8) Nanlaoy si Fe ta **manga** bata gabia
 AF-PERF.visit FM Fe OBL Pl child yesterday
 ‘Fe visited the children yesterday.’

In addition to nominal markers, personal pronouns in Higaonon are classified according to case. Three cases are distinguished: nominative, genitive, and oblique. These cases function as substitutes for animate and non-animate focus, marking the role of pronouns in the clause. Nominative pronouns correspond to the focused argument (FM), genitive pronouns mark possessors or agents in non-focus constructions, and oblique pronouns mark peripheral roles such as location, instrument, or beneficiary.

Table 5. Personal Pronoun Cases in Higaonon

Case	Abbreviation	Function
Nominative	NOM	Marks the focused argument (subject)
Genitive	GEN	Marks possessors or agents in non-focus clauses
Oblique	OBL	Marks peripheral arguments (location, instrument, beneficiary)

Verbs

In traditional grammar, verbs are defined as words that indicate action, activity, or event undergone by an entity (Rosario, Jr., 2017, p. 59). In addition, verbs are considered one of the major classes of lexical categories. In Higaonon, verbs may appear unaffixed or affixed. Unaffixed verbs refer to verbs that consist of a root, while affixed verbs refer to verbs with affixes.

Root:	<i>inəm</i>	‘inom; drink’
	<i>kan</i>	‘kain; eat’
	<i>awa</i>	‘alis; leave’
With Affix:	tag- <i>sugba</i>	‘magsaing; to cook rice’
	mig- <i>lalang</i>	‘nag-usap; talked’
	mig- <i>diya</i>	‘pumunta; went’
	mig- <i>languy</i>	‘naligo; took a bath’

Verbs in Higaonon are inflected for aspect and focus. In many Philippine-type languages, aspect is morphologically marked by way of affixation. The same process was observed in Higaonon verbs. Based on the data, there are three (3) types of aspect in the Higaonon language – perfective, imperfective and contemplative. These aspects are indicated by the verbal affix attached to the root. Perfective (PERF) aspect refers to an action or process that has been completed. Presented below are examples of Higaonon affixes used in indicating the perfective aspect.

(9) **Mig-***laba* *hu* *gumit* *gabia*
AF-PERF.wash NFM dress yesterday
‘She washed her dress yesterday.’

(10) K<**in**>*aən* *din* *su* *saging* *gabia*
PF-PERF.eat GEN.3Sg. FM banana yesterday
‘He ate the banana yesterday.’

Imperfective (IMP) aspect refers to an action or process that is ongoing. The following are examples of Higaonon verbal affixes used in marking the imperfective aspect.

(11) **Mig-***hipanaw* *sidan* *iman*
AF-IMP.walk NOM.3Pl now
‘They are walking now.’

(12) K<**in**>*aən* *hu* *bata* *su* *soda* *iman*
PF-IMP.eat NFM child FM fish now
‘The child is eating the fish now.’

Contemplative (CONT) aspect refers to action or process that has not started yet. Examples of Higaonon verbal affixes indicating the contemplative aspect are presented below.

- (13) **Ag-tampəd-un** dan su kayu kan
PF-CONT.cut GEN.3Pl FM tree later
'They will cut the tree later.'
- (14) **Tag-languy** kay ta wahig asəma
AF-CONT.bathe NOM.1Pl OBL river tomorrow
'We will bathe in the river tomorrow.'

Meanwhile, focus refers to the semantic relationship between the verbal predicate and the focused argument. Or (2020, p. 45) claimed that one of the defining characteristics of Philippine-type languages is their so-called *focus system* or *voice system* in other studies.

Like aspect, focus is indicated in the Higaonon language by the affix attached to the verb. The relationship between the subject argument or focused argument to the predicate is signaled by a focus or voice-marking affix on the verb (Kroeger, 2008).

Agent Focus

The agent or actor is the doer or performer of the action referred to by the verb. The following verbal affixes are used in Higaonon to express agent focus (AF).

Affix **mag-** is used in Higaonon to indicate agent focus (AF). The inflection of this affix in perfective and imperfective aspect is **mig-** while in contemplative aspect, the affix **tag-** is used. Affix **ag-** is an allomorph of affix **tag-**. Data shows that in many circumstances, affix **ag-** is used frequently by the speakers rather than the affix **tag-**.

- (15) **Mig-languy** su apo ta wahig
AF-PERF.bath FM grandmother OBL river
'The grandmother bathed in the river.'
- (16) **Mig-uli** si Ana iman ta balay din
AF-IMP.go home FM Ana now OBL house GEN.3SG
'Ana is going home now to her house.'
- (17) **Ag-diya** a ta balay dan
AF-CONT.go NOM.1SG OBL house GEN.3PL
'I am going to their house.'

Affix **maN-** is also used in Higaonon to express agent focus. In the perfective and imperfective aspect, affix **naN-** is used while affix **tagpaN-** is used to indicate the contemplative aspect of the verb. Phoneme /ŋ/ is represented by the symbol N. If /ŋ/ is attached to a root that starts with phoneme /l/, this sound is assimilated and became an alveolar nasal /n/.

(18) **Nan**-laoy a ki Maria gabia
AF-PERF.visit NOM.1SG OBL Maria yesterday
'I visited Maria yesterday.'

(19) **Nan**-laoy kay kandan iman
AF-IMP.visit NOM.1PL OBL.3PL now
'We are visiting them now.'

(20) **Tagpan**-laoy sidan inyu asəm
AF-CONT.visit NOM.3PL OBL.3SG bukas
'They will visit you tomorrow.'

Patient Focus

The patient is the entity or object that is directly affected by the action of the verb. In expressing patient focus (PF), affix **-ən** and **-on** are used in Higaonon.

Affix **-ən** is used in Higaonon to express patient focus. The inflection of this affix in the perfective and imperfective aspect is **<in>**. In the contemplative aspect, the inflection of this affix is **tag...-ən**. Affix **ag...-ən** is an allomorph of affix **tag...-ən**.

(21) P<**in**>alit hu bata ku su balay dan
PF-PERF.buy NFM child GEN.1SG FM house GEN.3PL
'My child bought their house.'

(22) T<**in**>ampəd hu bahe su lubid iman
PF-IMP.cut NFM woman FM rope now
'The woman is cutting the rope now.'

(23) **Ag**-tampəd-**ən** dan su kayu kan
PF-CONT.cut GEN.3PL FM tree later
'They will cut the tree later.'

Affix **-on** is also used in Higaonon to express patient focus. In the perfective and imperfective aspect, affix **<in>** is used while affix **tag...-on** is used in the contemplative aspect. Affix **ag...-ən** is an allomorph of affix **tag...-ən**.

(24) H<in>imu dan su bag gabia
PF-PERF.make GEN.3PL FM bag yesterday
'They made the bag yesterday.'

(25) **Ag-himu-on** hu manga bahe su manga alat asəm
PF-CONT.make NFM PL woman FM PL big baskets tomorrow
'The women will make the big baskets tomorrow.'

Adjectives

Adjectives are often called as describing words because syntactically, they modify nouns. Like nouns and verbs, adjectives in Higaonon can be affixed or unaffixed.

Root:	bungəl	'bingi; deaf'
	buta	'bulag; blind'
	umaw	'pipi; mute'
	daan	'luma; old'
With Affix:	ma-omis	'matamis; sweet'
	ma-lalas	'maanghang; spicy'
	ma-dagway	'magandal; beautiful'
	ma-dakəl	'marami; plenty'

(26) **Mahəməl** su bugta
soft FM soil
'The soil is soft.'

(27) **Madagway** su laga
beautiful FM maiden
'The maiden is beautiful.'

Adverbs

There are two (2) types of adverbs in Higaonon – the movable adverbs and adverbial clitics. Presented below are examples of movable adverbs that express when the action happens.

iman	'ngayon; now'	
	asəma	'bukas, tomorrow'
	kanikan	'mamaya; later'
	gabia	'kahapon; yesterday'
	ganin	'kanina; earlier'
	daləman	'kagabi; last night'

(28) Miglanguy **iman** si Maria ta dagat
AF-IMP.bath now FM Maria OBL sea
'Maria is bathing in the sea now.'

(29) Migsayaw sidan **daləman**
AF-PERF.dance NOM.3PL last night
'They danced last night.'

(30) Migdiya si Maria **gabia** ta gaun
AF-PERF.go FM Maria yesterday OBL farm
'Maria went to the farm yesterday.'

Closed Classes

Closed classes refer to groups of words that restrict new membership or prohibit the addition of new lexicon through inflection or derivation. The closed classes include pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and linker.

Pronouns

Higaonon has three (3) types of pronouns – personal, demonstrative, and interrogative pronouns. A personal pronoun is a type of pronoun used to replace a name of a person in a sentence. Presented in Table 6 are examples of Higaonon personal pronouns.

As mentioned above, personal pronouns in Higaonon are classified according to case: nominative, genitive, and oblique. These cases function as substitutes for animate and non-animate focus, marking the role of pronouns in the clause. Nominative pronouns correspond to the focused argument (FM), genitive pronouns mark possessors or agents in non-focus constructions, and oblique pronouns mark peripheral roles such as location, instrument, or beneficiary.

This classification highlights an important distinction between nominal markers and pronouns. Nominal markers are external particles that precede nouns and indicate their syntactic role. Pronouns, however, are self-contained forms that inherently encode their grammatical function through case. In other words, while nouns rely on markers to show whether they are focused or non-focused, pronouns themselves change form depending on whether they are nominative, genitive, or oblique.

Table 6. Higaonon Personal Pronouns

Person and Number	Nominative	Genitive	Oblique
1Sg	a	ku	kanak
1Pl (excl)	kay	day	kanay
1, 2Pl (incl)	kuy	taw	kanit
2Sg	yangka	nu	ta imu
2Pl	kaw	yu	ta inyu
3Sg	yangkun	din	ta kandin
3Pl	sidan	dan	ta kandan

(31) Tag-pulalaguy **kay** iman
 AF-CONT.run NOM.1Pl now
 ‘We are running now.’

(32) Tag-hipanaw **kiyu** asəma
 AF-CONT.walk NOM.2Pl tomorrow
 ‘We will walk tomorrow.’

(33) Tag-uli **sidan** ta balay
 AF-CONT.go NOM.3Pl OBL home
 ‘They will go home.’

(34) Migpalit **a** hu balay gabia
 AF-PERF.buy NOM.1Sg NFM house yesterday
 ‘I bought a house yesterday.’

Demonstrative Pronouns

Demonstrative pronoun is used to point to a specific person, object, or place. The following are examples of Higaonon demonstrative pronouns. In (36) and (37), the morpheme **ha** became **na** because [h] was assimilated by the nasal [n] of the word **iyān**.

Proximal	iyān ha i	‘ito; this’
Medial	iyān ha yan	‘iyān; that’
Distal	iyān ha an	‘iyon; that’

(35) **Iyān na i** su lapis
 NOM-Prox.this FM pencil
 ‘This is the pencil.’

(36) **Iyan na yan** minatay hu tibi
 NOM-Mid.that AF-PERF.die NFM tuberculosis
 ‘That is the person who died of tuberculosis.’

(37) **Iyan na an** su baso
 NOM-Dis.that FM glass
 ‘That’s the glass.’

Meanwhile, presented in Table 7 are examples of Higaonon demonstrative pronouns categorized based on the distance referred to from the person speaking – proximal, medial, and distal.

Table 7. Higaonon Demonstrative Pronouns

	Nominative	Genitive	Oblique
Proximal	iyan ha i	din tae	dini
Medial	iyan ha yan	din taan	din tae
Distal	iyan ha an	din taya	diya taya

Interrogative Pronouns

Interrogative pronouns are used to ask questions. The following are examples of interrogative pronouns in Higaonon.

inu ‘ano; what’
 hindu ‘saan; where’
 kan-u ‘kailan; when’
 sin-u ‘sino; who’
 imba ‘bakit’ why’

(38) **Inu** su ngadan nu?
 What FM name GEN.2Sg
 ‘What is your name?’

(39) **Hindu** ka iman?
 Where NOM.2Sg now
 ‘Where are you now?’

Conjunctions

There are two (2) types of conjunctions in Higaonon – the coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. Presented below are examples of conjunctions in Higaonon.

(40) Si Ben **daw** si Jose agdiya ta kalasan
FM Ben and FM Jose AF-CONT.go OBL forest
'Ben and Jose will go to the forest.'

(41) Nababaya su bata **tungud** nakauma su inay din
happy FM child because AF-PERF.came FM mother
GEN.3Sg
'The child is happy because the mother arrived.'

(42) Ag-awa unta su malaki **pero** uminudan
AF-CONT.leave was about FM young man but PERF.rain
'The young man was about to leave but it rained.'

Prepositions

A preposition is a morpheme that precedes a noun phrase to form a prepositional phrase that serves as a complement or modifier (Malicsi, 2012, p. 40). Malicsi further explained that preposition expands the meaning of a sentence to indicate direction, beneficiary, referent, etc. Based on the data, the following are examples of prepositions in Higaonon – **para hu**, **para ki**, **sumala sa**, **sumala ki**, and **mahitungud kandin**.

(43) **Para ki** Maria su kabukad
for Maria FM flower
'The flower is for Maria.'

(44) **Sumala ki** Jose agudan kan
according to Jose CONT.rain later
'According to Jose it will rain later.'

(45) **Para kandan** su manga gumit
for them FM PL clothe
'Clothes are for them.'

(46) **Mahitungud kandin** su ituk iman
about him FM rumor now
'The rumor is about him now.'

Linker

The Higaonon language has one linker (LNK) – the morpheme **ha**. The linker functions as a grammatical device that connects a modifier (such as an adjective or numeral) to a noun, ensuring that the two elements form a single noun phrase. This construction is typical of Philippine-type languages, where linkers serve to bind descriptive or quantifying elements to the head noun.

(47) daduwa **ha** bata
two LNK bata
'two children'

(48) malangkaw **ha** kayu
tall LNK tree
'tall tree'

(49) mamada **ha** dahon'
dry LNK leaf
'dry leaf'

Syntax

Discussed in this section are the different types of sentences in Higaonon and their word order.

Word Order

As shown in the following examples, Higaonon clauses are predicate-initial. After the predicate, the core arguments and the peripheral arguments may appear. In (50), the verbal predicate is followed by the agent or doer of the action indicated by the verb, while in (51), the verbal predicate is followed by the direct object. In (52), the adjectival predicate is followed by the noun phrase that it modifies. Meanwhile, in (53), the prepositional phrase, which is the head of the predicate, is followed by a noun phrase. As observed in the examples, the order of arguments after the predicate is free.

(50) Uminuli si Ana ta balay gabia
AF-PERF.go FM Ana OBL home yesterday
'Ana went home yesterday.'

(51) Miglutu hu soda si Maria daləman
AF-PERF.cook NFM fish FM Maria last night
'Maria cooked fish last night.'

(52) Malangkaw su buhok din
long FM hair GEN.3Sg
'She has long hair.'

(53) Tungəd hu bata su balita iman
about child FM news now
'Today's news is about the child.'

Verbal Sentence

A verbal sentence is a type of sentence where the head of the predicate is a verb. The following are examples of verbal sentences in Higaonon.

(54) Nangulahi su bata
AF-PERF.scream FM child
'The child screamed.'

(55) Migdiya su bahe ta simbahan
AF-PERF.go FM woman OBL church
'The woman went to the church.'

(56) Migputawa su maama ganin
AF-PERF.laugh FM man earlier
'The man laughed earlier.'

Non-verbal Sentence

A non-verbal sentence is a type of sentence where the head of the predicate is not a verb. Javier et al. (2018, p. 92) claimed that one of the characteristics of Philippine languages is their ability to develop grammatical sentences even without a verb. Examples of non-verbal sentences in Higaonon are presented below. As shown in the examples, the head of the predicate can be an adjectival phrase (AP), a prepositional phrase (PP), or a noun phrase (NP).

(57) Mabulig-buligon si Pedro
helpful FM Pedro
'Pedro is helpful.'

(58) Para hu bata su kabukad
for the NFM child FM flower
'The flower is for the child.'

(59) Su maama su palagnao
FM man FM teacher
'The man is the teacher.'

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study is to document and describe the sounds and grammar of the Higaonon language spoken in Opol, Misamis Oriental. Specifically, the study analyzes its phonology, morphology, and syntax, describing the language's segmental phonemes, suprasegmental features, and syllable structure; its morphemes and lexical categories; and its basic sentence structure and sentence types.

Based on the results of the study, Higaonon has sixteen (16) consonant phonemes and five (5) vowel phonemes. Word stress in this language is phonemic. Higaonon words can be categorized as open and closed classes. The open classes include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The closed classes include pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and linkers. In Higaonon, verbal affixes attached to verb roots indicate both aspect and focus. Similar affix structures are used to mark the perfective and imperfective aspects in agent and patient focus constructions, while benefactive focus employs the same affix structure across perfective, imperfective, contemplative, and infinitive forms.

Like many Philippine languages, Higaonon exhibits a predicate-initial sentence structure. Higaonon sentences may be classified based on the head of the predicate: verbal sentences, where the predicate head is a verb, and non-verbal sentences, where the predicate head is a noun, adjective, or preposition.

This study contributes to addressing the limited research on the Higaonon language by providing systematic grammatical documentation. Learning and understanding the grammar of the Higaonon language provides insights into the culture and identity of its speakers. As indigenous people, the Higaonon's culture is not widely known; therefore, this study lays the groundwork for understanding and raising awareness on their culture, contributing to eradicating prejudices and biases towards indigenous peoples.

The findings are also valuable for Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), as they may serve as a reference for teaching the Higaonon language in elementary schools located in Higaonon communities and for individuals interested in learning the language.

A study conducted by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (2023) examined Higaonon orthography across several areas, including Bukidnon, Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur, Cagayan de Oro, and various municipalities in Misamis Oriental, such as Claveria, Magsaysay, and El Salvador. The study revealed differences in vowel phonemes, especially between the varieties from Bukidnon and Misamis Oriental (Claveria) as well as those from other locations. In contrast, this study focuses on the Higaonon language as spoken in Opol, identifying a phonological system consisting of five vowel phonemes and sixteen consonant phonemes with phonemic word stress. These results indicate that the Opol Higaonon variety may share features with or differ from other Higaonon communities, particularly since vowel distinctions are a noted area of variation.

The phonological and morphosyntactic descriptions presented in this study provide a basis for comparison with Higaonon varieties in other parts of Mindanao that remain largely understudied. Given the geographic distribution and linguistic diversity of the Higaonon people, identifying correspondences and differences among local varieties is essential for future dialectological research.

Considering the evidence of phonological variation reported by KWF (2023) and the absence of comprehensive grammatical descriptions of Higaonon varieties outside Opol, it is recommended that future studies expand to other Higaonon-speaking areas. Such studies can determine whether differences in vowel systems also extend to morphosyntax, and whether these varieties constitute dialects or sub-varieties of a single Higaonon language. A comparative dialectological framework would not only refine our understanding of Higaonon's internal diversity but also support the long-term goal of developing a standardized reference grammar for use in education and cultural preservation.

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