

## **Puntóng-Buná: The Curious Case of a Barangay-level Phonological Variation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Puntóng-Buná, spoken exclusively in Buná Cérca and Buná Léjos, in Indang, Cavite, Philippines, is used by people who seem to be perpetually asking questions. Following The United Nations' proclamation of 2019 as International Year of Indigenous Languages, the research has pioneered the documentation of the Puntóng-Buná, and has identified possible factors that have been contributory to its perceived threat of abandonment. Anchored on uptalk, community of practice, and stereotypes of language use, the study aimed to answer these questions: (1) How is the phonological variation characterized? (2) Why does phonological variation occur in this speech community as opposed to others? (3) What are the reasons for the perceived disappearance of this phonological variation? The research techniques used were: (1) interviews; (2) observations (unstructured); and (3) program software. The research instruments were (1) an interview guide; (2) field notes; and (3) data sheet graphs. The investigation has yielded the following reasons for

the perceived disappearance of the PB: (1) social stigma; (2) old generation; (3) impurity; (4) influx of new residents; and (5) occupations and mobility. Puntóng-Buná now being documented as a unique element to the world's language heritage may finally give it a fighting chance for survival.

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## INTRODUCTION

The social milieu has “pervasive effects on the accents and dialects which are its medium” (Chambers & Schilling, 2018). However, studies on language variation and change brought about by particular societal conditions are fairly recent. Nevertheless, change and variation are so prevalent in language that distinctions would simply be the norm. Language becomes available to speakers by virtue of “choice of words, selections of options within the grammatical system, or exploitation of phonological distinctions” (Clark et al., 2007). A certain dialect may have distinctive phonological features that contrast it from other dialects and give its speakers the impression of creating different sounds. Phonological variation is thus the subject of this paper as a variable where the speakers’ way of speaking is not the same as the others living around them. The actual instantiations, or variants, of this variable are the use of the Filipino intonation pattern 3-3-4 (asking questions), that appears in the rise and fall of the voice pitch during conversations. Factors such as attitudes and emotions affect the rhythmic and intonational patterns of language. In fact, Crystal (1975), as cited in Ukam et al. (2017), argued that “intonation is not a single system of contours and levels, but the product of interaction of features from different prosodic systems – tone, pitch-range, loudness, rhythmicity and tempo.”

Buná Tagalog, spoken by the citizens of Barangays<sup>1</sup> Buná Cérca and Buná

<sup>1</sup> smallest administrative unit in Philippine government

Léjos, Indang, Cavite, Philippines, is a curious case in the study of phonology and sociolinguistics because people seem to be perpetually asking questions, and that it is unique as a barangay-level-only phonological variant. In fact, this peculiar intonation variant is used only in the two barangays and nowhere else in the entire town, nor in the entire Cavite province, that it had taken on its own unique name: “puntóng-Buná” (henceforth, PB), ‘punto’ is Filipino for ‘intonation’). D. Trick (personal communication, January 8, 2019) stated that “language variation is typically a consequence of long periods of time during which there was little or no contact with neighboring communities, but this is rather rare for a particular barangay... [this] would be referred to as a barangay-level dialect (as opposed to, e.g., province-level, town-level, etc.)”. Figure 1 shows the locale of the study.

## Research Questions

This study set out to answer three questions: (1) How is the phonological variation characterized? (2) Why does phonological variation occur in this speech community as opposed to others? (3) What are the reasons for the perceived disappearance of this phonological variation?

In order to answer the questions, the study anchored its framework on Warren’s (2005, 2016) phonological variation called ‘uptalk’, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s (1999) community of practice, and on Meyerhoff’s (2011) motivations in regard to variation. According to Warren (2005, 2016), a phenomenon called ‘uptalk’ is



Figure 1. Locale of the study. Upland Cavite towns and Buná Cérca and Buná Léjos ( ) in Indang (Maplandia, 2019).

commonly used to describe rising intonation at the end of declarative sentences. It is “a marked rising intonation pattern found at the ends of intonation units realized on declarative sentences”. Some communities tend to make statements sound like questions and Warren argued that ‘uptalk’ was “perceptually salient” because it was used in contexts where questions would not be expected. PB’s high-rising terminal is a perfect example of an ‘uptalk’ but this one is displayed by an entire community (barangay) and is exclusive only to them. Gussenhoven (2004) contended that rising intonation gave utterances a further discursal meaning that was independent of the meanings of the words themselves. McConnell-Ginet (1983) argued that high-rising terminals were used by interlocutors in powerful ways, such as challenging, grabbing, and maintaining control.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999) introduced the concept of community of practice (CoP) which described the analytical domain of variation and was

defined in terms of the members’ subjective experience of the boundaries between their community and other communities. It is to mean social categories that are locally meaningful, “distinctions that the participants themselves can and often do orient to explicitly” (Ehrlich et al. as cited in Meyerhoff, 2001). In CoP, variations in language are analyzed in terms of the speakers’ entire range of social practices. In this context, the PB is seen as “one vehicle by which speakers construct, maintain or contest the boundaries of social categories and their membership in or exclusion from those categories” (Meyerhoff & Strycharz, as cited in Chambers & Schilling, 2018). These distinctions make the PB totally unique because they are not random but are systematic, encompassing the entire community but not the adjoining areas.

Eckert’s (2012) ethnographic work examines the role of variation and social meaning. According to Eckert and Wenger (2005), as cited in Chambers and Schilling (2018), “practices” are the engagements

or activities shared by the speakers which should all share three criteria: mutual engagement, jointly negotiated enterprise, and shared repertoire. In mutual engagement, the citizens of Buná Cérca and Buná Léjos get together in order to experience shared practices. In using the PB in all their day-to-day tasks and activities, the citizens are delineated from their neighboring barangays and barrios. Examples that stood out in the interviews and observations are their occupation in preparing a local delicacy (*kalámay*-Buná), where the cooks praise the goodness of the sweet rice while using very heavy PB; in their farming and animal care, and in leisure and pastime activities. In jointly negotiated enterprise, a purpose defines a certain pursuit and mutual accountability. Religious processions and the *pasyón* (epic narrative of the life of Jesus Christ that is sung) using the PB identify their speech community as Buna, different from the way the *pasyón* would be uttered and chanted in other areas. The purpose is to be able to create a unique way of singing the *pasyón* the “Buná way”. In shared repertoire, the PB represents the cumulative result of internal reserve and resources, especially in local lore, traditional healing knowledge, and beliefs. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show two transcripts depicting such stories.

Meyerhoff (2011) related social psychology with cases of language variation. She identified four motivations in regard to variation: (1) A desire to show how one fits in with some people and are different from others; (2) A desire to do things that have value in the community (and associate

oneself with that value); (3) A desire not to do things that are looked down on in the community (and have others look down on the speaker); and (4) A desire to work out how others are orienting themselves to the concerns. The research aimed to investigate the perceptions of the citizens of Buná toward their variant intonation. The PB marks the extent to which a speaker identifies as a ‘real’ Buná native, and the extent to which he may want to differentiate himself from outsiders visiting his place.

A wide dearth in the review of literature regarding the PB exists since this phonological variation has never been identified as such in any scholarly research, and thus has never been studied phonologically or sociolinguistically. Gonzalez (1970) did report on the results of an investigation into the linguistically relevant acoustic correlates of intonation on Philippine languages. The study, however, focused generally on Tagalog, and not on the PB. The PB as being initially identified and descriptively documented in this research is the study’s justification. This work is a contribution, too, to the development of Philippine national culture and literary scholarship by ascribing meaning to a phonological variation, which is in line with the Mother Tongue- Based Multilingual Education. Moreover, the study is a direct answer to the call of United Nations and UNESCO towards the documentation and preservation of the world’s unique dialects and languages, 2019 being proclaimed as International Year of Indigenous Languages.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Design

The study is an ethnographic qualitative research that employed the research techniques of (1) interviews; (2) observations (unstructured); and (3) program software in the form of a voice pitch analyzer. The research instruments were (1) an interview guide; (2) field notes or log notes in the form of stories; and (3) data sheet graphs of the voice pitch analyzer. The publication manual of the American Psychological Association (2018), 6<sup>th</sup> edition, had been used in the documentation format.

### Sample and Participant Selection

In the selection of samples, informants had been suggested who would fit the following criteria, set by Newell (1995): (1) male or female; (2) fifty years old or older; (3) have lived in Buná Cérca and Buná Léjos all their lives; (4) lucid in mind and speech; (5) have good memories and possess a wide view of the history of the area; and (6) preferably have gone beyond the elementary grade in education. In general, they were chosen based on their educational ability to initiate talks and record conversations of communicative events with the local folks. As for the sample size, the determination of the total number of informants was based on similar researches like Chambers (2003), Trousdale (2005), Feagin (1979), and Rozul (2012), who interviewed 1-20 informants. The fifteen (15) informants, 10 females and 5 males, interviewed in this study all followed the set criteria for authenticity and so 15 is a justified number.

### Methods of Data Collection

**Interview.** The informants were interviewed and videotaped in their most natural, everyday talk showing very strong fidelity to the PB. Through the unstructured type of eliciting responses, more meaningful data were collected. According to Kiesling (2011), natural speech could only happen when the informant knew that no recording is taking place but, for ethical reasons, the speaker must know that recording *is* taking place. Enough speech and recordings were done to come up with large samples of the variation.

**Observation.** The narrative, or storytelling, technique was employed in order to gather field notes or log notes. This observation technique served as the orientation detailing time, persons, places, and situations which the researcher needed to understand in order for meaning to be created. From the informants' storytelling, 16 narratives were produced.

After the data from the recordings were transcribed by the researcher and a title was assigned to each of the 16 narratives, three experts in the field (a) determined as a group the patterns of the phonological variant through the coding scheme 3-4-4 in order to signify the increase in the intonation during the talk; and (b) arrived at one final transcript showing marks in the variation. Among the 16 transcripts, the two most unique in terms of fidelity to the PB are shown on Figure 3a (Masilaw) and Figure 3b (Salapê).

**Program Software.** One select informant who used a very strong PB was asked to tell first-hand accounts of his experiences with (1) a pit of snakes (‘Ahas’), and (2) Elisa’s winning a softball match (‘Elisa’). Two members of the community outside Buná Léjos (one male and one female) also narrated accounts of their experiences using their normal storytelling voices. The narrations were accompanied by a recording using a software called a voice pitch analyzer.

**Member Checking.** Member checking had been done during the interview when the researcher restated interview questions to determine comprehension and accuracy. It was also done after the study was completed when the research findings had been shared with the informants for their comments on whether or not the summaries reflected their opinions and experiences. In this second member check, more narratives for future transcripts and pitch analyzers had been volunteered to the researcher.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In response to Research Question Number 1, the research has described the PB using the (a) the three levels of speaking; (b)

transcripts showing the PB; (c) voice pitch analyzer; and (d) isoglosses.

(a) Figure 2a shows the three levels of speaking used by Filipinos (Gonzales-Garcia, 1999): low, normal, and high. Figure 2b shows the general way of asking questions. Sentences normally start at Level 2, the normal level, then reaches until Level 3 when the speaker is asking a question, and stays at Level 3 until the end of the sentence. In some regions in the Philippines, an even higher level, L4, is found. With the PB (Figure 2c), the speaker begins with Level 3 then proceeds using Level 4 until the end of the sentence, whether or not one is asking a question. In other words, the accent is begun at Level 3 then always ends on Level 4, making the speakers appear to be perpetually asking questions when they talk.

(b) Figures 3a and 3b have indexed the speakers’ geographic origin (*tagá-Buná*) in these two transcripts (*Masilaw* and *Salapê*) because their peculiar intonation is a tell-tale sign of where they are coming from. In general, ‘who you are’ means ‘where you come from’. It is the region of origin which determines which dialectical variety of the language a speaker uses. Based on the recordings, numbers 3 and 4, used in asking questions, almost always appear in the way the speakers talk. These transcripts depict

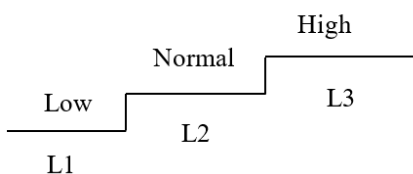


Figure 2a. Three levels of speaking

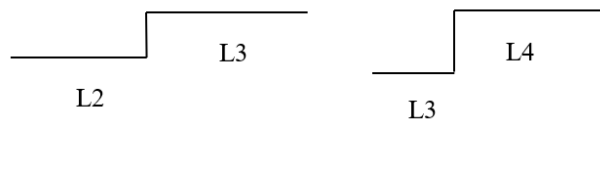
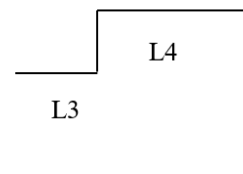


Figure 2b. The general way of asking questions



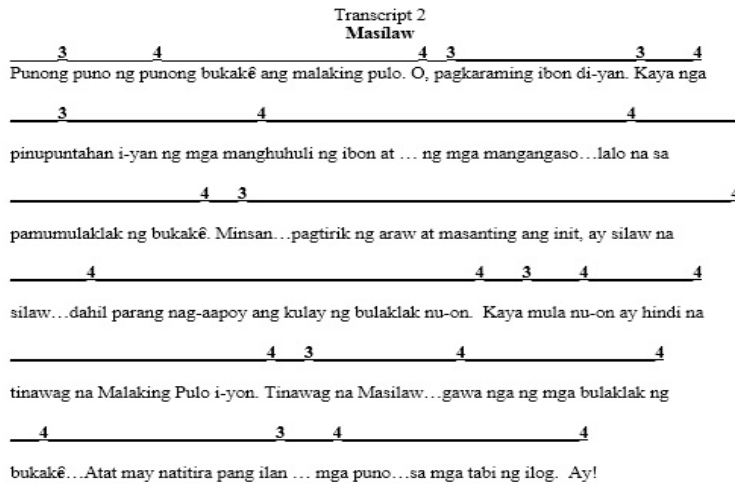


Figure 3a. Masilaw transcript with numbers 3-4-4

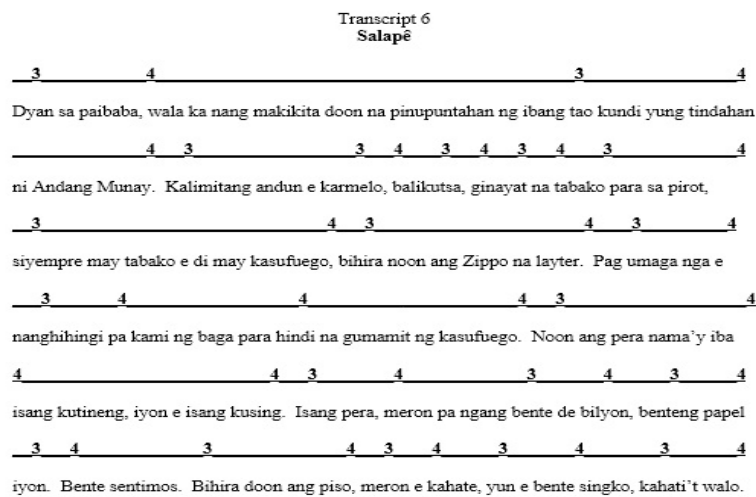


Figure 3b. Salapê transcript with numbers 3-4-4

very strong PB and the stories are reflective of the way the people value tradition and history.

(c) Figures 4a, 4b, 4c, and 4d show the four graphs that were produced after the application of a voice pitch analyzer. A licensed electronics and communications engineer verified the application software used in the study and interpreted the findings. Most males often speak at the 65-250 Hertz

range and most females at the 100-525 Hertz range. Figures 4a and 4b show that most of the points fall within the High Frequency range (200 Hertz-290 Hertz) which indicates that the male participant telling the story has a pitch that falls within a female range. This high pitch range is attributed to his using the PB, his normal storytelling pitch, while recounting the incidents. Figures 4c and 4d show pitches of a male and

female who live outside the community. Most of the points fall within the Low Frequency Range (120 Hertz-200 Hertz), their normal storytelling pitches, further setting boundaries for the PB. According to Perez et al. (2005) and Clark et al. (2007), pitch is synonymous to frequency in that the higher the frequency, the higher the pitch. High-pitched sounds have faster frequencies or more vibrations than low-pitched sounds with slow frequencies.

(d) Isoglosses. Figures 5a and 5b show isoglosses depicting a more or less dialect

boundary. An isogloss, or a linguistic map, is a line that demarcates the area in which some phonological, lexical, morphological, or syntactic feature can be found (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998). The isoglosses show boundaries of social dialectology that have been identified on the basis of what was elicited from the speakers' reports of what they usually say.

The lone street is the only road connecting Buná to the rest of Indang. Mild to strong PB litter this isogloss landscape. The no-PB is almost non-existent.

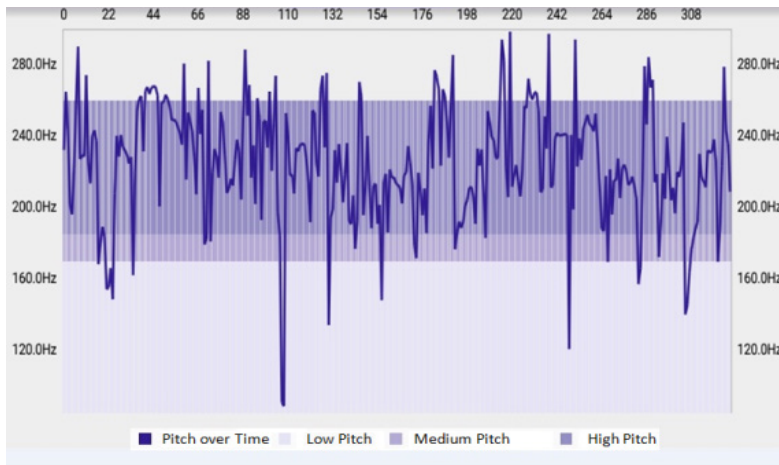


Figure 4a. Recount of 'Ahas' as shown in the voice pitch analyzer

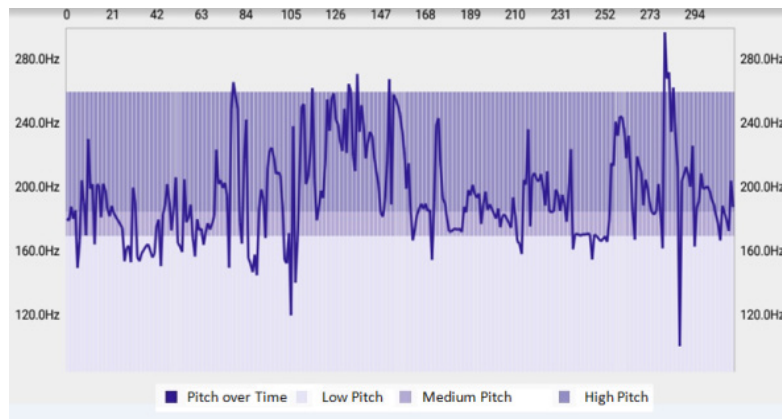


Figure 4b. Recount of 'Elisa' as shown in the voice pitch analyzer



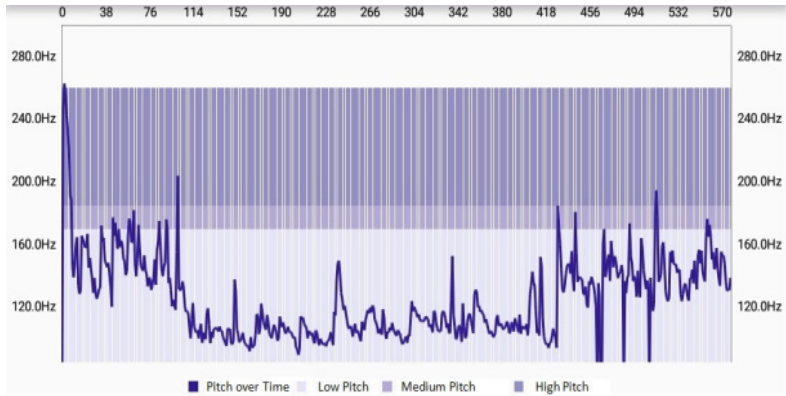


Figure 4c. Recount of 'Te Corong' (male) as shown in the voice pitch analyzer

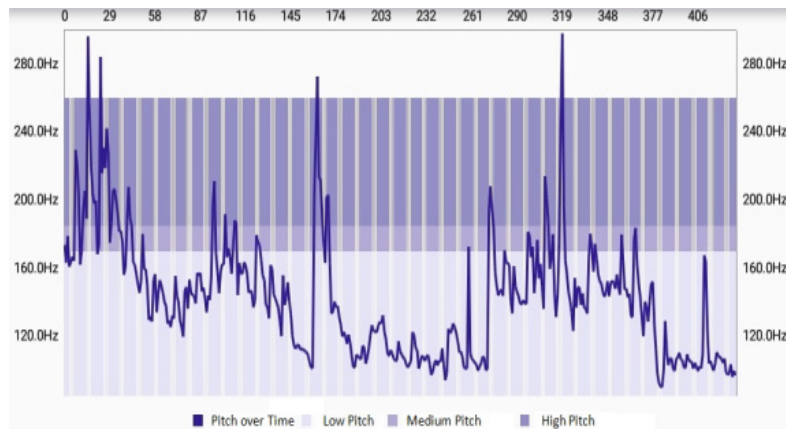


Figure 4d. Recount of 'Bayad' (female) as shown in the voice pitch analyzer



Figure 5a. Isogloss A shows the lone street going in and coming out of Buná.

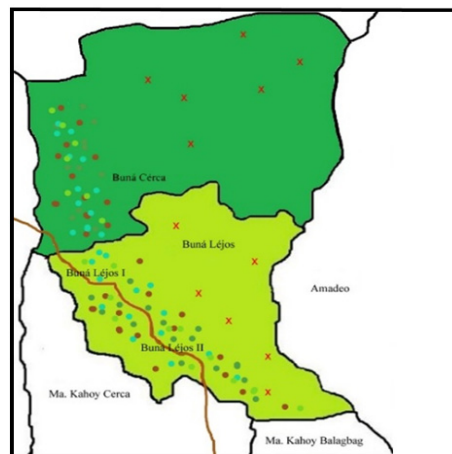


Figure 5b. Isogloss B shows the geographical distribution of the PB.

- strong PB
- mild PB
- no PB
- × farms/no habitation

In response to Research Question Number 2, isolation, social stigma, networks, membership and belongingness, PB as source of pride, and legacy were the reasons why the PB occurs in Buna alone and not in any of the surrounding communities. These reasons had been enumerated and volunteered spontaneously by all the 15 respondents. The first was isolation. Place is one of the easiest ways of defining a community. According to Johnstone (2004), as cited in Fought (2010), the role of place in the construction of phonological identity is highly significant. The two barangays are adjoining but they are both relatively isolated since there is only one major road going in and coming out into the national highway, the Indang-Mendez national road (see Figure 4). The folks' way of living, basically farming, has also secluded them from neighboring towns and cities which are more modern and progressive and has, in a way, preserved their way of living, thus segregating the PB all the more. In dialectological terms, isolation causes people to speak and sound less like people from other places (Chambers, 2009).

The PB has become both “salient markers of identity, project prestige and opportunity, or stigma or inequality”, as Don and Blommaert (2009, in Meyerhoff, 2011) put it. It is this stigma, or inequality, that is PB's biggest obstacle to enduring, and to outsiders from using it. Outsiders tend to distance themselves as far away as possible from using it. They get embarrassed and get laughed at when they try using it. The citizens of Buna feel that they are being

treated unfairly but respond that they cannot change their accent just to make people change their way of treating them.

A third reason for the persistence of the PB in Buna and not elsewhere is networks. Within tightly structured, relatively homogeneous social clusters – as in the Buna neighborhoods, parish, school, barangay hall – individuals further demarcate themselves by this phonological variation and put the community apart from other Tagalog-speaking communities. These reasons had been enumerated and volunteered spontaneously by all the 15 respondents. According to Milroy (1992), an individual's vernacular norms are what they are depending on how close his ties are with the local community. There is a gradation of linguistic conformity to local dialect correlated fairly closely with an individual's integration into the network.

Membership and belongingness caused by the PB is very strong in Buna. It is inward looking and outweighs ties with other speech communities surrounding them. A special bond is felt within the group of PB users than with outsiders. According to Mesthrie et al. (2000), language practices may be equally diagnostic of the social coherence of a group, and may be a more natural boundary for sociolinguistic study than geographical cohesion alone. The people who use the PB are in habitual contact with each other and share ways of interpreting the intonation and of using it. Myers-Scotton (2003), as cited in Meyerhoff (2011), indicated that this ‘requires balancing goals that may be in conflict with each other...the tension [being]

highlighted particularly when a speaker has to maximize his fit with others, while simultaneously maintaining individual distinctiveness'. The use of the PB is an example of people maintaining *communal* common ground at the community level (MacWhinney & O'Grady, 2018) in order to keep individuality while existing in groups.

Pride and the desire to transfer the PB to the next generation are clearly shown. The PB is a value that the people find good and worthy of passing on to the next generation. PB norms are shared and people work together to preserve it by its continued use. Similar to the statement made by the authors of *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*: "A person who is made ashamed of his own language habits suffers a basic injury as a human being: to make everyone, especially a child, feel so ashamed is as indefensible as to make him feel ashamed of the colour of his skin" (Halliday, 1968, cited in Robertson & Acar, 2007).

In response to Research Question Number 3, the reasons for the perceived disappearance of this phonological variation are social stigma, old generation is dying, PG has become impure, influx of new residents into the community, and occupation and mobility. Again, these reasons had been enumerated and volunteered spontaneously by all the 15 respondents. Similar to the response in Research Question Number 2, social stigma also plays a role in the possibility of losing the PB. "Discrimination on the grounds of accent still, unfortunately, occurs" (Trudgill, 2002). There is a similar strong desire for speakers to avoid using

forms that will bring them scorn or censure in their speech community, or outside of it. The PB is "*pinagkákamatayan*" (cause of death), the source of trouble that erupted in an inter-barangay basketball game. Outsiders would rather not be identified with the PB. In other words, avoidance is sometimes just as important a factor as identification. The old folks are extremely limited in mobility. With them, the PB remains intact and pure. But once this old generation passes, the silent epidemic of language loss that is occurring throughout the world may as well happen here. In addition to this, the influx of new residents has something to do with the identities of new members as accommodated in the community. New members of the barangay bring their linguistic styles into the group, seeing themselves as part and parcel of the interlocutors, thus making the PB 'impure'.

Occupation and mobility have to do with the fact that some members of the community are exposed to more opportunities to expand their linguistic repertoire. The variability between speakers highlighted the important role that their occupation and mobility could make to their speech when they get back to their community. The tighter people are connected to their local network, the narrower the range of their contacts, thus the stronger their local intonation is. And vice versa, the greater the mobility, the weaker would the intonation be.

## CONCLUSION

The continued existence of this phonological variation is dependent on its speakers'

attitudes: how they look upon the PB's uniqueness, and their own personal or communal reasons why their children must use it. Only if it is treasured and nurtured by everyone, is it worth sustaining and the PB will be preserved in its unadulterated form. According to Daigneault (2014), the best way to protect a language is to respect and protect its people. The language preservation and revitalization movement growing around the world is a way towards this respect and recognition.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following: (1) to use another linguistic tool (i.e. speech analyzer) in future studies involving variations in other Philippine languages; (2) to investigate other varieties of Tagalog (Batangas Tagalog, Quezon Tagalog, and Marinduque Tagalog) for phonological variations; (3) to implement a program with the Department of Education about the promotion of the PB in conjunction with the use of the Mother Tongue in the K-12 Curriculum.

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