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# Discourse Topicality in the Languages of Northern Sarawak

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6<sup>th</sup> September 2017

# Two important Questions...



1. What can we say about **alignment** in these languages?
2. To what extent do they support the theory of **alignment shift** from ergative to accusative (Aldridge 2011)?

# Roadmap



- **Symmetrical voice** systems
  - How these have led to debate surrounding alignment
- **Morphosyntactic variation in Lun Bawang, Kelabit & Sa'ban**
  - Voice systems and case-marking
- A **discourse methodology** for comparing voice systems
- **Results and conclusions**



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# Symmetrical Voice

# Western Austronesian

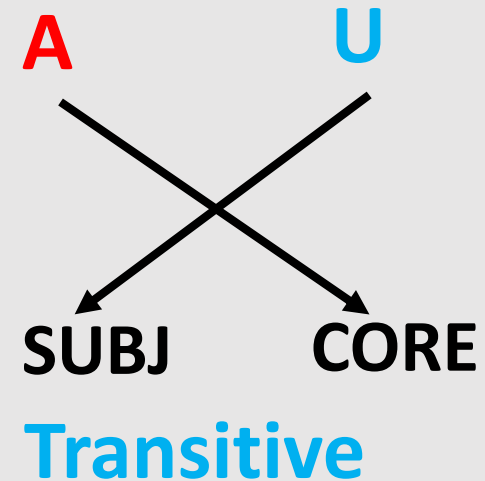
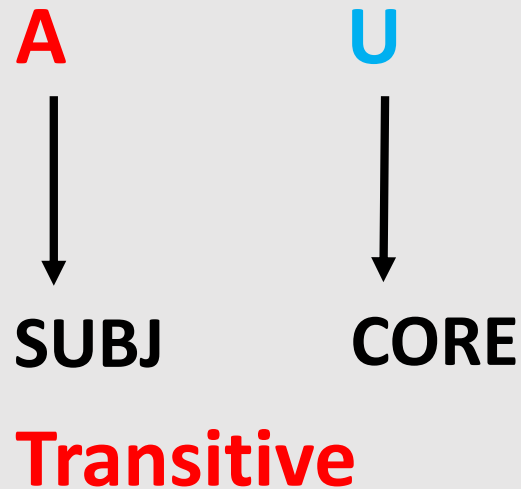
- Western Austronesian (WAn) voice alternations are **symmetrical**

## Actor Voice

## Undergoer Voice

Semantic Roles

Syntactic Functions



# Kelabit



(1a) **Actor Voice**

Nenge<sup>red</sup>laak    nuba<sup>blue</sup>'

PFV.AV.cook    rice

'Her mother cooked rice'

tesineh nedih

mother 3SG.POSS

← **privileged  
argument/subject**

**Root** = *laak*

**AV** = *neN-*

**UV** = *-in-*

(1b) **Undergoer Voice**

Linaak    tesineh nedih

PFV.UV.cook    mother 3SG.POSS

'Her mother cooked rice'

nuba'

rice

← **privileged  
argument/subject**



# Evidence for Symmetrical Analysis

## • Morphology

- **Actor** and **Undergoer** in both AV and UV are **NPs**, whereas obliques are otherwise **PPs**:

(2) La'ih sineh nemerey nuba' [ngen anak nedih]<sub>PP</sub>  
 man DEM PFV.AV.give rice to child 3SG.POSS  
 'The man gave rice to his child'

**Conclusion**  
***Both AV and UV  
 are transitive!***

## • Syntax

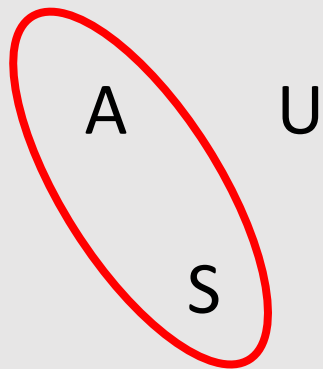
- **Actor** and **Undergoer** behave like core arguments in both AV and UV:
- Privileged argument can be relativized on (3); Non-privileged actor and undergoer form a constituent with the verb (4).



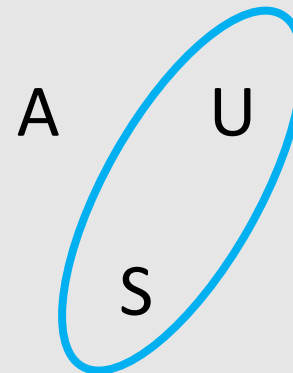
# Symmetrical Voice and Alignment

- This has led to considerable debate over their **alignment** (Kroeger 1993).
- This is typically determined by comparing **transitive** and **intransitive** clauses:

Accusative



Ergative







# Symmetrical Voice and Alignment

- What happens if there is more than one transitive clause type?

(5) Uku' tudo lem bakul nedih  
dog sit in basket 3SG.POSS

S

'The dog is sitting in its basket'

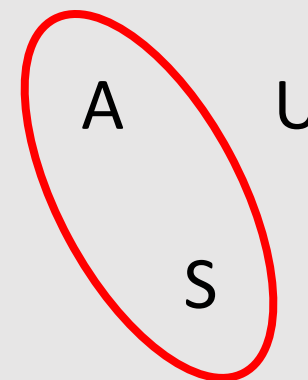
La'ih sineh nekuman buah kabur  
man DEM AV.PFV.eat pineapple

A

U

'The man eats pineapple'

Accusative





# Symmetrical Voice and Alignment

- What happens if there is more than one transitive clause type?

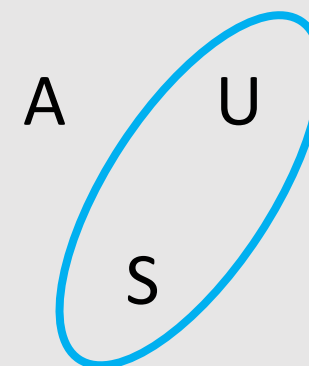
(5) Uku' tudo lem bakul nedih  
 dog sit in basket 3SG.POSS  
 S

'The dog is sitting in its basket'

bua' kaber kinan la'ih sineh  
 pineapple UV.PFV.eat man DEM  
 U A

'The man eats pineapple'

Ergative



# Possible Analyses



1. AV is the basic transitive clause (UV is a passive) = **accusative alignment**
  2. UV is the basic transitive clause (AV is an antipassive) = **ergative alignment**
  3. Both AV and UV are equally basic = **symmetrical alignment**
- The morphosyntactic facts suggest that **UV is not a passive** and **AV is not an antipassive** which would seem to rule out 1 and 2...

... but **transitivity** is not only defined in terms of morphosyntax  
but also semantics and **discourse!**



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# Morphosyntactic Variation

# Philippine-type vs Indonesian-type



# Tagalog



- (6a) **Actor Voice**      b<um>ili      ng isda      sa tindahan      ang lalaki.  
<AV>buy      GEN fish      OBL store      NOM man  
'The man bought fish at the store.'
- (6b) **Undergoer Voice**      bi-bilh-in      ng lalaki      sa tindahan      ang isda.  
IRR-buy-UV      GEN man      OBL store      NOM fish  
'The man will buy the fish in the store.'
- (6c) **Locative Voice**      bi-bilh-an      ng lalaki      ng isda      ang tindahan.  
IRR-buy-LV      GEN man      GEN fish      NOM store  
'The man will buy (a/the) fish at the store.'
- (6d) **Benefactive Voice**      i-bi-bili      ng lalaki      ng isda      ang bata.  
BV<PFV>buy      GEN man      GEN fish      NOM child  
'The man will buy (a/the) fish for the child.' (Foley 2008)

# Balinese



(7a) **Actor Voice**

**Tiang**                    nyepak                    **cicing-e.**  
1SG                        AV-kick                    dog-DEF  
'I kicked the dog.'

(7b) **Undergoer Voice**

**Cicing-e**                    sepak                    **tiang.**  
dog-DEF                    UV.kick                    1SG  
'The dog was kicked by me.'

c. **Passive**

**Nasi-ne**                    ajeng-a                    (**teken anak-e**                    **ento**)  
Rice-DEF                    eat-PASS                    by                    person-DEF                    that  
'The rice was eaten (by that person)' (Artawa 1998:8-10)

# Alignment



- There are important differences between Philippine-type and Indonesian-type languages, particularly in the **semantic properties of the AV undergoer**
- This led to the proposal that Western Austronesian languages underwent a **shift in alignment** from ergative to accusative (Aldridge 2011)...
- ... i.e. moved from treating **UV as the basic transitive clause** to treating **AV as the basic transitive clause**.





# Lun Bawang, Kelabit and Sa'ban

- Lun Bawang, Kelabit and Sa'ban are three closely related WAn languages of the **Apad Uat** subgroup spoken in **Northern Sarawak**
- They are **genetically** and **geographically transitional** between the languages of the Philippines and the languages of Indonesia...
- Lun Bawang has been described as the most **conservative**, Sa'ban as the most **innovative** and Kelabit as **intermediate** (Clayre 2005, Hemmings 2016)



# Number of Voices



- Both Lun Bawang and Kelabit preserve a **three-way** system of voice alternations with a morphological instrumental voice:

(8) *Lun Bawang*

## Instrumental Voice

Pimeli ku                      lal      usin    nih.

IV.buy 1SG.GEN              hen      money DEM

‘I’ll use this money to buy the hen.’ (Clayre 2014: 132-133)

- In contrast, Sa’ban has a **two-way** system of AV/UV alternations like Balinese

# Case-marking in Pronouns



	<b>Lun Bawang (Clayre 2005)</b>	<b>Kelabit (Hemmings 2016)</b>	<b>Sa'ban (Clayre 2005)</b>
NOM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• subjects</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• subjects</li><li>• AV undergoers</li><li>• (UV actors)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• subjects</li><li>• AV undergoers</li><li>• UV actors</li></ul>
GEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• UV actors</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• UV actors</li></ul>	
OBL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• obliques</li><li>• AV undergoers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• obliques</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• obliques</li></ul>

# Summary



- This group of languages makes an interesting case study since they appear to be at a **transitional stage**:
  - Lun Bawang preserves the most ‘Philippine-type’ characteristics
  - Sa’ban innovates the most ‘Indonesian-type’ characteristics
  - Kelabit has a mixture of properties
- Hence, if WAn languages do differ in their alignment in a way that reflects **alignment shift**, we might expect to find some evidence of it here!
- So how can we do that...?



# A discourse methodology for comparing voice systems

# Discourse Transitivity

- The basic transitive clause typically has certain **discourse characteristics** (Givón 1994, 2017):
  1. It is likely to be **more frequent** than non-basic voices
  2. It is likely to have a **topical actor and undergoer** in contrast to other voices

	Topicality of Arguments		
Active/Ergative	Actor	>	Undergoer
Inverse	Undergoer	>	Actor
Passive	Undergoer	>>	Actor
Antipassive	Actor	>>	Undergoer



# Referential Distance and Topical Persistence

- **Referential distance** is the number of clauses backwards until the previous mention of a referent (Givón 1994):
  - 1-3 is taken to indicate high topicality
  - >3 is taken to indicate low topicality
- **Topical persistence** is the number of times that the same referent appears in the immediately following ten clauses (Givón 1994):
  - >2 is taken to indicate high topicality
  - 0-2 is taken to indicate low topicality

# Tagalog



- Cooreman, Fox, and Givón (1984) applied these sorts of tests to Tagalog and found:
  1. **UV** is more frequent than **AV**
  2. **UV** has high RD and TP values for both **actor** and **undergoer**
  3. **AV** has high RD and TP for the **actor**, but low values for the **undergoer**
- This suggests that UV is a basic transitive clause, whilst AV is a functional antipassive, which supports a **(discourse) ergative** analysis!



# Northern Sarawak



- To see if the same claims can be made of the three languages of Northern Sarawak, I analysed comparable **folktales** in Lun Bawang, Kelabit and Sa'ban.
  - Frequency of AV vs UV
  - RD and TP of actor and undergoer in AV vs UV
- If alignment is ergative/accusative rather than symmetrical we expect to find **differences between the voices...**
- If there has been a shift in alignment then we might expect to find **different patterns in the different languages...**



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# Results

# Frequency



	<b>AV</b>	<b>UV</b>
Lun Bawang	62%	38%
Kelabit	60%	40%
Sa'ban	44%	56%

# Referential Distance



		Actor Voice (AV)		Undergoer Voice (UV)	
		1-3 (High)	>3 (Low)	1-3 (High)	>3 (Low)
Lun Bawang	Actor	98%	2%	89%	11%
	Undergoer	62%	38%	89%	11%
Kelabit	Actor	89%	11%	92%	8%
	Undergoer	64%	36%	68%	32%
Sa'ban	Actor	94%	6%	95%	5%
	Undergoer	50%	50%	80%	20%

# Topical Persistence



		Actor Voice (AV)		Undergoer Voice (UV)	
		>2 (High)	0-2 (Low)	>2 (High)	0-2 (Low)
Lun Bawang	Actor	76%	24%	75%	25%
	Undergoer	36%	64%	56%	44%
Kelabit	Actor	74%	26%	77%	23%
	Undergoer	54%	46%	43%	57%
Sa'ban	Actor	67%	33%	85%	15%
	Undergoer	33%	67%	52%	48%

# Summary



- In Sa'ban and Lun Bawang, UV looks more like a basic transitive clause than AV = **ergative alignment**
- In Kelabit, both AV and AV look like transitive clauses = **symmetrical alignment** or perhaps **accusative alignment**?
- In all cases, the patterns are different from Tagalog as AV has some **antipassive-like** features and some **active-like** features
- This supports the idea of **alignment shift** but doesn't correspond to morphosyntactic status in the way we might have expected...



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# Conclusion

# Conclusion



1. What can we say about **alignment** in these languages?

Discourse tests suggest that Sa'ban and Lun Bawang may preserve characteristics of discourse ergativity, whilst Kelabit is discourse symmetrical/accusative

2. To what extent do they support the theory of **alignment shift** from ergative to accusative (Aldridge 2011)?

The study supports the theory of alignment shift as the languages of Northern Sarawak show different patterns of discourse topicality from Tagalog and each other.

However, alignment does not correlate straightforwardly with the transition from Philippine-type to Indonesian-type morphosyntax



# Conclusion



- This suggests that symmetrical voice and ergative/accusative alignment are **not mutually exclusive**
- It suggests that **variation in discourse topicality patterns** doesn't necessarily correlate exactly with how **morphosyntactically conservative** a language is.
- Consequently, it is important to consider both **morphosyntax** and **discourse** when analysing symmetrical voice systems.



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# Many Thanks!

Especially to Beatrice Clayre for kindly sharing her knowledge and texts of the Sa'ban and Lun Bawang languages and my very patient Kelabit consultants.