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Symmetrical Voice and Information Structure in the languages of Northern Sarawak

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Introduction

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- In this talk, I explore the role of **information structure** in determining the choice of voice construction in a **symmetrical voice** languages

- The aim of this paper:

  - To illustrate how **information structure** interacts with voice choice
  - To compare three closely related languages: Lun Bawang, Kelabit & Sa'ban
  - To explore if the languages **differ** in the role that information structure plays…

Outline

1. Symmetrical Voice in Northern Sarawak
2. Information Structure
3. The “Unhappy Rats” translation task
4. Conclusions

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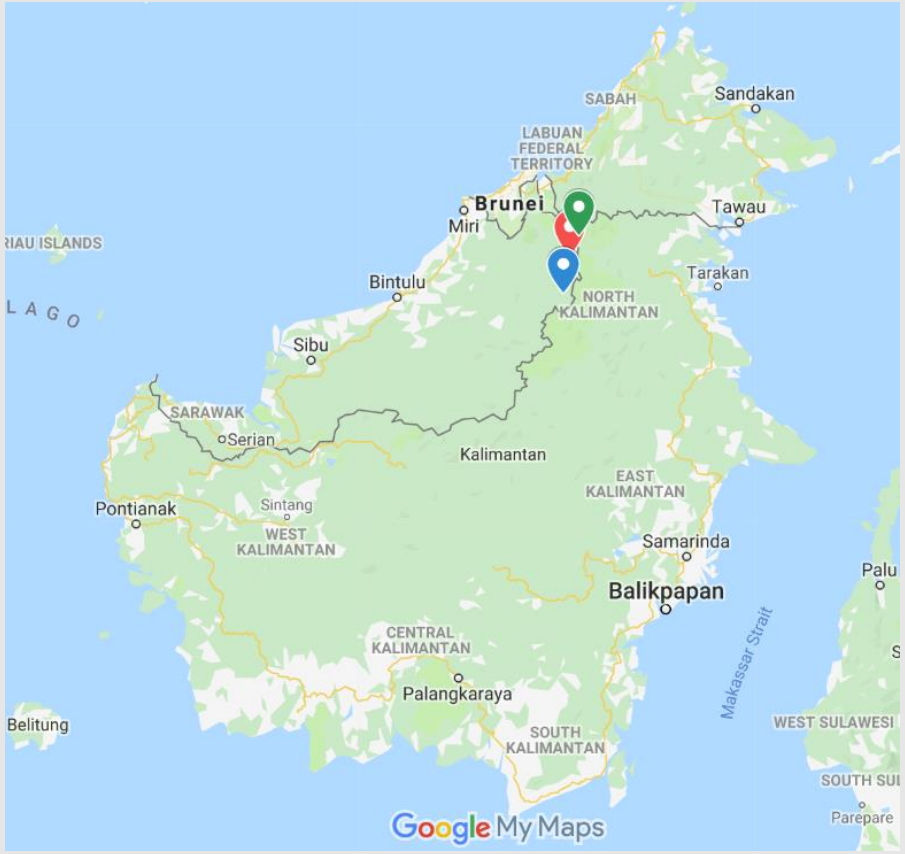
Symmetrical Voice

Northern Sarawak Languages

- This talk is about three languages of the Apad Uat subgroup spoken in Northern Sarawak: Lun Bawang; Kelabit and Sa'ban.

- Data is taken from my own fieldwork in Ba' Kelalan; Bario and Long Banga.

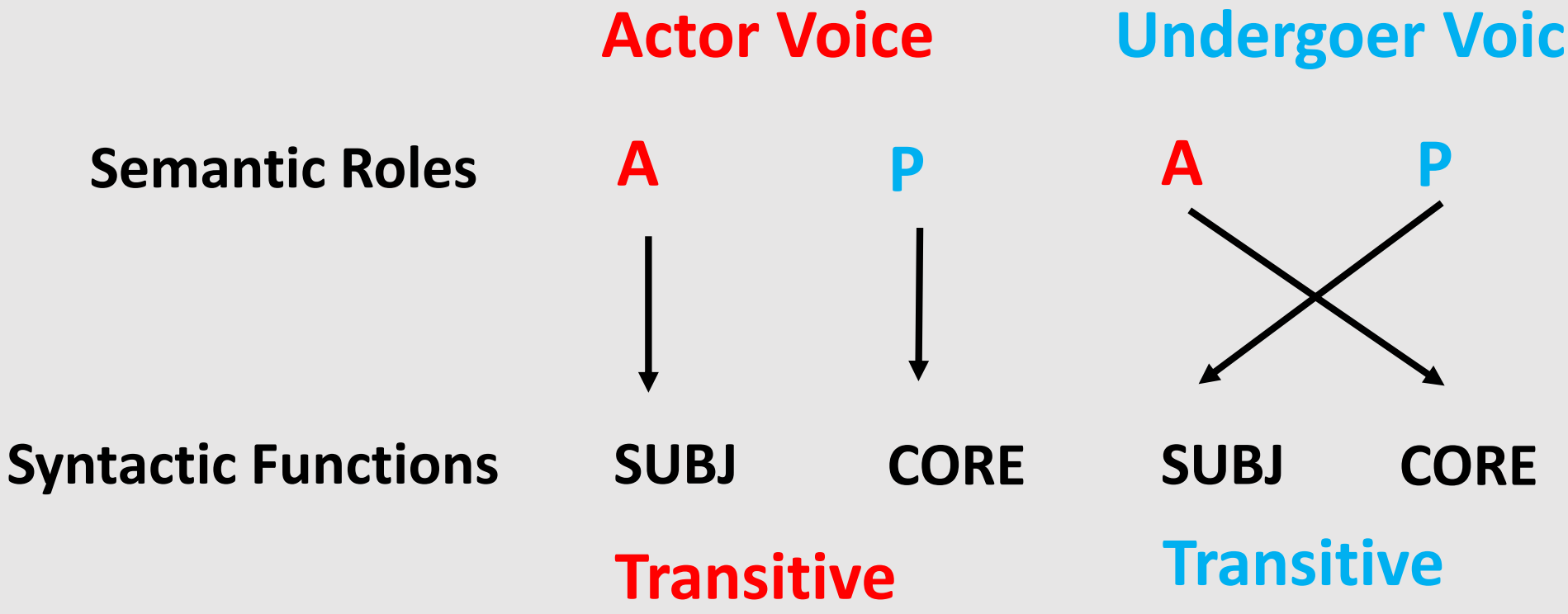
- They all appear to have **symmetrical voice** systems but differ in their **morphosyntactic properties** (Clayre 2005, 2014)



Austronesian

Symmetrical Voice

- Western Austronesian languages are known to have **symmetrical voice** alternations
  - ➢Alternations in the mapping of arguments to functions without demotion/detransitivisation



Symmetrical Voice (Kelabit)

(1a) **Actor Voice**

Nekuman	*bua' kaber*	**la'ih**	**sineh**
PFV.AV.eat	pineapple	man	DEM

'The man ate pineapple'

Subject

(1b) **Undergoer Voice**

Kinan	*la'ih*	*sineh*	**bua'**	**kaber**
PFV.UV.eat	man	DEM	pineapple	

'The man ate pineapple'

Subject

GFs are distinguished by **word order** and optional pre-subject **particles** (teh & neh)

Symmetrical Voice (Lun Bawang)

(2a) **Actor Voice**

ne’	nukat	*kelatih*	**uih**	nalem
PFV.go	AV.dig	worms	1SG.NOM	yesterday

‘I went to dig up worms yesterday’

(2b) **Undergoer Voice**

Tinukat	*uih*	**kelatih**	**dih**	feh
UV.PFV.dig	1SG.NOM	worms	DEM	PT

‘I already dug up the worms’

Symmetrical Voice (Sa'ban)

(3a) **Actor Voice**

Aréen	**súel**	**éek**	moté'	*kuu'*	*éek*
Sibling	girl	1SG	AV.kick	dog	1SG

'My sister kicked my dog'

(3b) **Undergoer Voice**

Yoté'	*yeh*	**kuu'**	**éek**
UV.PFV.kick	3SG	dog	1SG

'She kicked my dog'

Symmetrical Voice (Sa’ban)

(3c) **Periphrastic Undergoer Voice (aroo’)**

Aroo’	*aréen*	*súel*	*éek*	moté’	**kuu’** **éek**
UV.PFV.do	sibling	girl	1SG	AV.kick	dog 1SG

‘My sister kicked my dog’ (one time)

(3d) **Periphrastic Undergoer Voice (an)**

An	*aréen*	*súel*	*éek*	moté’	**kuu’** **éek**
UV.IRR.do	sibling	girl	1SG	AV.kick	dog 1SG

‘My sister kicks my dog’ (all the time)

Variation in Northern Sarawak

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- Lun Bawang, Kelabit and Sa'ban all have symmetrical voice systems but these differ in their **morphosyntactic** properties:

  1. The number of voice alternations
  2. The continued use of conservative verbal morphology
  3. Case-marking

- Morphosyntactically, **Lun Bawang** is the most conservative and **Sa'ban** the most innovative (Clayre 2005, 2014)

Austronesian Case Marking

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- In more conservative WAn languages, case-marking is used to indicate the **function** of an argument within the voice system.

- In the languages of Northern Sarawak, we only find case-marking in the **pronouns**

- Typically, three case distinctions are assumed for **pronouns** (cf. Kroeger 1993)

- **NOM** – subjects
- GEN – non-subject actors
- OBL – obliques and non-subject undergoers

	actor	undergoer
AV	**NOM**	OBL
UV	GEN	**NOM**

Case in Northern Sarawak

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Lun Bawang

	actor	undergoer
AV	**NOM**	OBL/**NOM**
UV	GEN/**NOM**	OBL/**NOM**

most conservative

Kelabit

	actor	undergoer
AV	**NOM**	**NOM**
UV	GEN/**NOM**	**NOM**

most innovative

Sa’ban

	actor	undergoer
AV	**NOM**	**NOM**
UV	**NOM**	**NOM**

Summary

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- The three languages of Northern Sarawak have **symmetrical voice** systems

- However, they differ in their **morphosyntactic properties** such that we might describe Lun Bawang as most conservative ("Philippine-type") and Sa'ban as most innovative ("Indonesian-type")

- The question is what **motivates** the choice of actor voice vs undergoer voice and does this **differ** depending on the morphosyntactic status of the language?

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Information Structure

Information Structure

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- **Information structure** can be understood as a formal mechanism for facilitating effective information exchange and update (Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011, Erteschik-Shir 2007).

- Among the most important information structure roles are topic and focus:

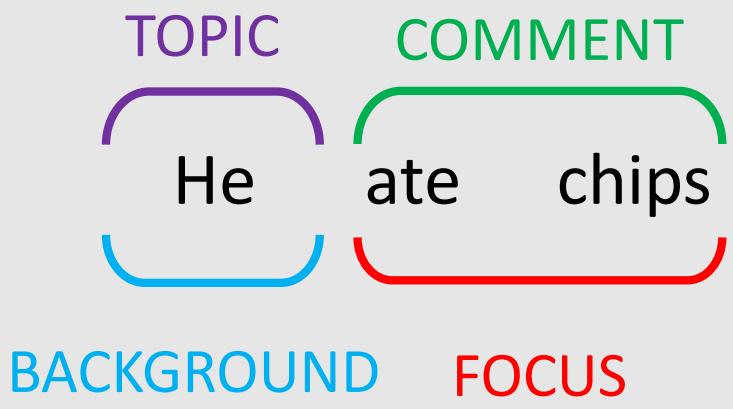
  - Topic is an entity that the speaker **identifies** and **about** which a proposition is made (Krifka 2008)

  - Focus is the **informative** part of the proposition and indicates the presence of **alternatives** (Krifka 2008)

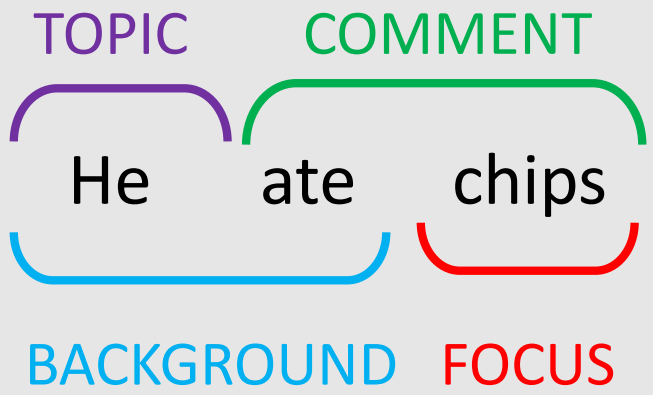
Information Structure

- These allow us to divide the information according to two major distinctions:
  - Topic vs Comment
  - Focus vs Background

CONTEXT: What did Peter do?



CONTEXT: What did Peter eat?



Information Structure

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Q: Does **information structure** play a role in voice choice in the languages of Northern Sarawak?

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Unhappy Rats

Voice and Information Structure

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- A long-standing question in the Austronesian literature is what determines **voice choice** and whether this is linked to **information structure** (see e.g. Chen & McDonnell 2019)

- It is typically agreed that the privileged argument is not equivalent to topic or focus (Kroeger 1993, Kaufman 2005)

- Nonetheless, the use of AV vs UV may be preferred in certain **information structure contexts**.

Unhappy Rats

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- To explore this, I used the **unhappy rats translation task** in which there are 12 short paragraphs for speakers to translate.

  - Each paragraph contains a test sentence
  - The first six paragraphs contain a generic undergoer ("cats chase rats")
  - The second six paragraphs contain a definite/specific undergoer ("my sister kicked my dog")
  - The context differs to establish different semantic arguments as topic, focus, background etc.

Unhappy Rats

1. Rats live stressful and dangerous lives. The noise of the traffic makes them nervous and sick. Dogs chase them. And also (our domestic) cats catch and kill rats, when they get the chance.

Undergoer = **topic**, Actor+Verb = **comment/focus**

3. Cats are silly creatures with nothing but nonsense on their minds. They climb up on curtains, they bring home mice. Cats also chase and catch big rats, when they are in the mood. Who wants to have a big rat in their house?

Actor = **topic**, Undergoer+Verb = **comment/focus**

5. When I look out of the window, I see only unhappiness and violence. Dogs bark at hens and make them lose their feathers. Old bitter women scream at children and make them cry. And also (our domestic cats) catch and kill innocent rats, when no one is looking.

Actor+Undergoer+Verb = **all focus**

Voice and Information Structure

- Latrouite & Riester (2018) argue that **information structural prominence** is a key factor in voice choice in Tagalog.

  ➢ They define prominence as having a non-default mapping whereby the default for actors = **topic**, and the default for undergoers = **focus**

Voice and Information Structure

- In their study of Tagalog, they found the following:

  - If only the undergoer has a non-default mapping (topic), UV is preferred
  - If only the actor has a non-default mapping (focus), AV is preferred
  - If both actor & undergoer have default mappings, voice choice is determined by other parameters (e.g. **the definiteness of the undergoer**)
  - If both actor & undergoer have non-default mappings, the focality of the actor appears to be more prominent and AV is preferred.
  - Non-default mappings may also be expressed using **word order/ marked constructions** rather than through voice choice alone.

Lun Bawang – Generic Undergoer

Context	AV	UV
1. U = topic, V+A = new	4	0
2. U = topic, V = given, A = contrasted	4	0
3. A = topic, V+U = new	4	0
4. A+U = contrasted, V = given	3	0
5. All focus	3	0
6. A = topic, U = contrasted, V = given	4	0
	22/22	0/22

Lun Bawang – Definite Undergoer

Context	AV	UV
1. U = topic, A+V = new	4	0
2. U = topic, A = contrasted	4	0
3. A = topic, V+U = new	4	0
4. All focus	4	0
5. A = topic, U = contrasted, V = given	4	0
6. A+U = topic, V = new	4	0
	24/24	0/24

Lun Bawang

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Information Structure context does not affect **voice choice**

AV is the default and is used regardless of context…

Kelabit – Generic Undergoer

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Context	AV	UV
1. U = topic, V+A = new	5	1
2. U = topic, V = given, A = contrasted	2	4
3. A = topic, V+U = new	4	2
4. A+U = contrasted, V = given	5	1
5. All focus	5	0
6. A = topic, U = contrasted, V = given	5	1
	26/35	9/35

Kelabit – Definite Undergoer

Context	AV	UV
1. U = topic, A+V = new	6	0
2. U = topic, A = contrasted	6	0
3. A = topic, V+U = new	1	5
4. All focus	6	0
5. A = topic, U = contrasted, V = given	1	4
6. A+U = topic, V = new	0	6
	20/35	15/35

Kelabit

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Information Structure context does play a role in **voice choice**

AV is preferred when both actor & undergoer have non-default roles

AV is preferred if the actor has a non-default role (e.g. all focus)

UV is preferred if the undergoer has a non-default role (e.g. topic)

When arguments have default roles, choice is affected by **definiteness:**

AV with generic undergoer & UV with definite/specific undergoer

Sa'ban – Generic Undergoer

Context	AV	UV
1. U = topic, V+A = new	6	0
2. U = topic, V = given, A = contrasted	6	0
3. A = topic, V+U = new	5	1
4. A+U = contrasted, V = given	5	1
5. All focus	6	0
6. A = topic, U = contrasted, V = given	3	3
	31/36	5/36

Sa'ban – Definite Undergoer

Context	AV	UV
1. U = topic, A+V = new	2	4
2. U = topic, A = contrasted	4	2
3. A = topic, V+U = new	3	3
4. All focus	4	0
5. A = topic, U = contrasted, V = given	1	5
6. A+U = topic, V = new	1	5
	15/34	19/34

Sa'ban

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Information Structure context does play a role in **voice choice**

AV is preferred if the actor has a non-default role (e.g. all focus)

UV is preferred if the undergoer has a non-default role (e.g. topic)

When arguments have default roles, choice is affected by **definiteness:**

AV with generic undergoer & UV with definite/specific undergoer

Prominent status of definite undergoers may trigger choice of UV

Summary

- In Lun Bawang, actor voice was used regardless of **information structure context**
- In Kelabit & Sa'ban, voice choice may be triggered by **non-default mappings** between semantic roles and information structure (as in Tagalog)
- The study reaffirms that the **information status** of the subject does not determine voice choice alone: in fact, **UV constructions** appear most frequently in the unhappy rats translation task in contexts where the actor is a topic, regardless of the status of the undergoer.
- Instead, it is the information status of **the clause as a whole** that is important

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Conclusion

Conclusion

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- In this paper, I explored the interaction between **symmetrical voice** and **information structure** in Lun Bawang, Kelabit & Sa'ban.

- Using data from the **unhappy rats translation task**, I showed that **information structure** played a role in voice choice in Kelabit and Sa'ban – but seemingly not in Lun Bawang where AV was used by default

- In particular, Kelabit and Sa'ban appeared to follow the pattern identified in **Tagalog** whereby a prominent or non-default status (relative to the rest of the clause) could trigger the selection of a given voice construction.

Conclusion

- The comparison of Lun Bawang, Kelabit and Sa'ban suggests several important conclusions:

1. Preserving Philippine-type **morphology** does not necessarily mean that the voice system will **behave** in the same way as a Philippine-type language

2. Information Structure can play a role in determining voice choice – but it is not the role of the privileged argument but the **status of the entire clause**

3. Voice can interact with other syntactic phenomena (e.g. word order) in order to express information in a given context

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Many Thanks!

Frequency of AV vs UV

	AV	UV	Total
Lun Bawang	229 (87%)	35 (13%)	264
Kelabit	548 (75%)	183 (25%)	731
Sa’ban	119 (43%)	156 (57%)	275

Lun Bawang Case Marking (Ba’ Kelalan)

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(4a) **Actor Voice**

Uih	nemefet	*keneh*
1SG.NOM	AV.hit	3SG.OBL
‘I hit him’		

(4b)

Uih	nemefet	*ieh*
1SG.NOM	AV.hit	3SG.NOM
‘I hit him (it?)’		

	actor	undergoer
AV	**NOM**	OBL/**NOM**

Lun Bawang Case Marking (Ba’ Kelalan)

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(4c) **Undergoer Voice**

Bifet	*uih*	ieh
UV.PFV.slap	3SG.GEN	3SG.NOM
‘He hit him’		

(4d)

Bifet	*uih*	keneh
UV.PFV.hit	3SG.GEN	3SG.OBL
‘He hit him’		

	actor	undergoer
AV	**NOM**	OBL/**NOM**
UV	**NOM**	OBL/**NOM**

Kelabit Case Marking (Bario)

(5a) **Actor Voice**

Uih	ni'er	*ieh*
1SG.NOM	AV.see	3SG.NOM

'I see him.'

(5b) **Undergoer Voice**

Seni'er	*kuh*	**t=ieh**
UV.see	1SG.GEN	3SG.NOM

'I saw him'

(5c)

Seni'er	*uih*	**t=ieh**
UV.see	1SG.NOM	PT=3SG.NOM

'I saw him'

	actor	undergoer
AV	**NOM**	**NOM**
UV	GEN/**NOM**	**NOM**

Sa’ban Case Marking (Long Banga)

(6a) **Actor Voice**

Éek	nnal	*ieh*
1SG.NOM	AV.see	3SG.NOM

‘I see him’

	actor	undergoer
AV	**NOM**	**NOM**
UV	**NOM**	**NOM**

(6b) **Undergoer Voice**

Éek	inal	*ieh*
1SG.NOM	PFV.UV.see	3SG.NOM

‘He saw me’ (Clayre 2005: 33)