

# Information Structure and Syntactic Choices in Northern Sarawak



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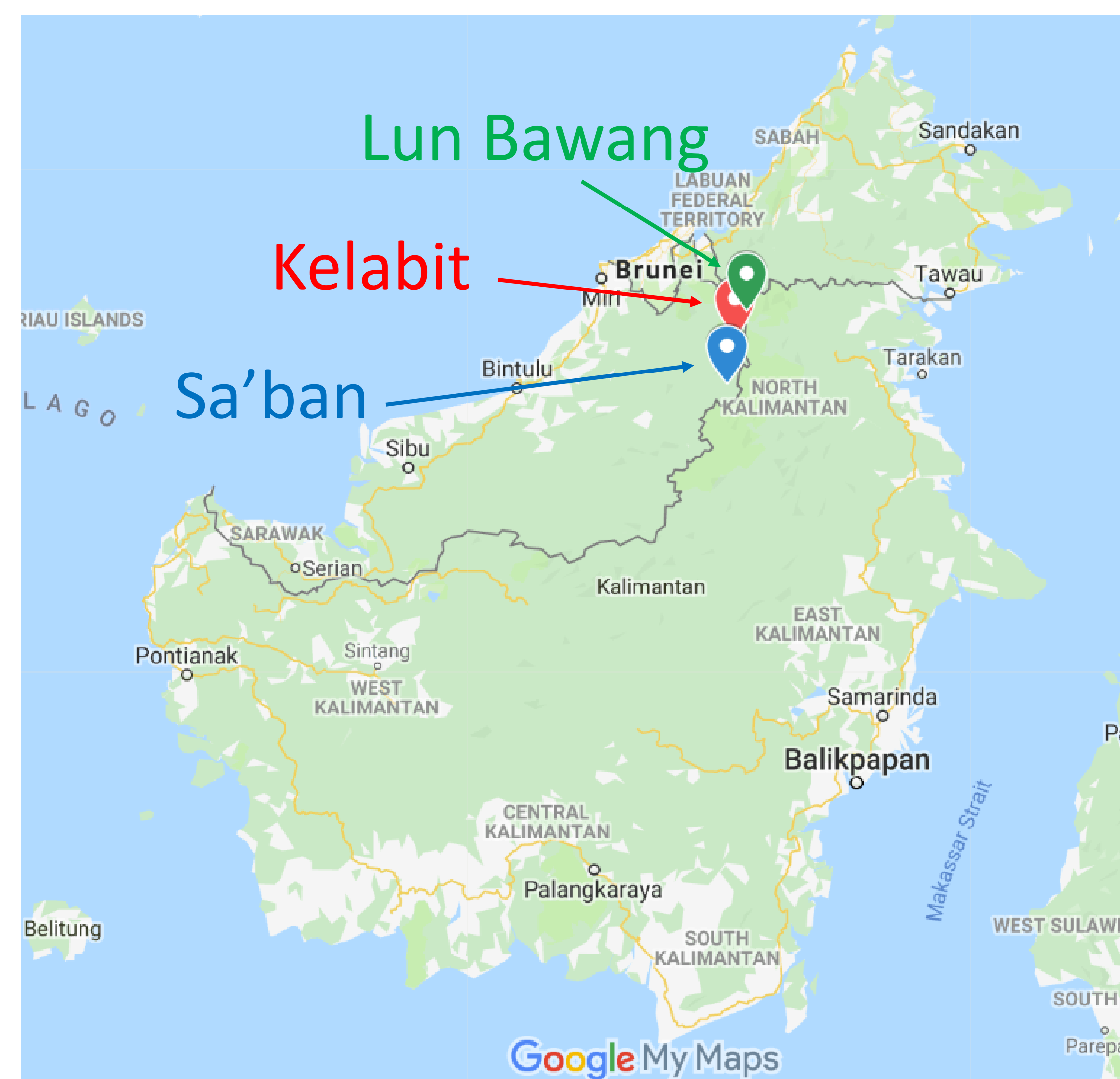
## 1. Introduction

- ❖ **Kelabit, Sa'ban** and **Lun Bawang** are **Western Austronesian** languages of the **Apad Uat** subgroup in Northern Sarawak (Kroeger 1998)
- ❖ Like other Western Austronesian languages, they have **symmetrical voice** alternations.
- ❖ They also have **flexible word order** for the subject which can appear either pre- or post-verbally.
- ❖ Finally, Kelabit and Lun Bawang have **differential marking** of pronouns

## 2. Information Structure

- ❖ **Information structure** is the formal mechanism for information exchange and update (Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011, Erteshik-Shir 2007, Lambrecht 1994).
- ❖ **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)

Does information structure  
play a role in syntactic  
choices in Kelabit, Sa'ban  
and Lun Bawang?



AV    A = subject    U = object

UV    U = subject    A = object

K    NOM vs GEN    UV actor

LB    OBL vs NOM    AV/UV undergoer

## 3. I-S and syntactic choices

- ❖ To test the role of I-S, I elicited **grammaticality judgements** in specific contexts, examined a **naturalistic text corpus** and used the unhappy rats **translation task**.
- ❖ **Word Order**: fronting can be a means of expressing focus
- ❖ **Differential Marking**: Differential use of NOM in Kelabit is used to mark contrastively focused actors. Differential OBL in Lun Bawang may mark topical undergoers.
- ❖ **Voice**: no one-to-one correlation between voice and I-S role. The three languages differ in the interaction between voice and information structure

## 4. Conclusion

- ❖ Information structure can play a role in **unexpected syntactic choices** in terms of word order & marking.
- ❖ This suggests that symmetrical voice languages can be affected by the same I-S considerations as **accusative/ergative languages**.
- ❖ However, information structure role does not **determine** voice choice. Hence, symmetrical voice should be viewed as a **syntactic system** of alternations.