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On the subject of 'Subjects'

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Introduction



- The grammatical function of '**subject**' is often taken as fundamental in typological and syntactic work
- However, it remains controversial whether subjects exist in Western Austronesian on account of their unusual systems of **verbal morphology** and the fact that **typical subject properties are split** in non-actor voices.
- This has led some to claim that 'subject' is not a relevant notion; and others to argue over whether subject is best equated with the **actor** or the **privileged argument**

Introduction



- In this paper, I consider the evidence for identifying subjects from two closely-related languages in Northern Sarawak: **Kelabit** and **Sa'ban**.
- Using cross linguistic tests, I show that there are good arguments for considering the **privileged argument** to be the **subject** in both languages, rather than a **topic** or **absolute**.
- Moreover, there are arguments for treating the **actor** as an object in non-actor voice constructions.

Introduction



- Consequently, I argue that Kelabit and Sa'ban both have a **subject** function, even if it is different from other subjects cross-linguistically.
- Therefore, we should be wary of using Western Austronesian as evidence against the universality of the subject function.
- And rather view it as an opportunity to refine the cross-linguistic **definition**.

Roadmap



- Kelabit and Sa'ban
- The subject debate
- Privileged Argument as Subject
- Privileged Argument as Topic?
- Non-privileged Actor as Object
- Implications and conclusion



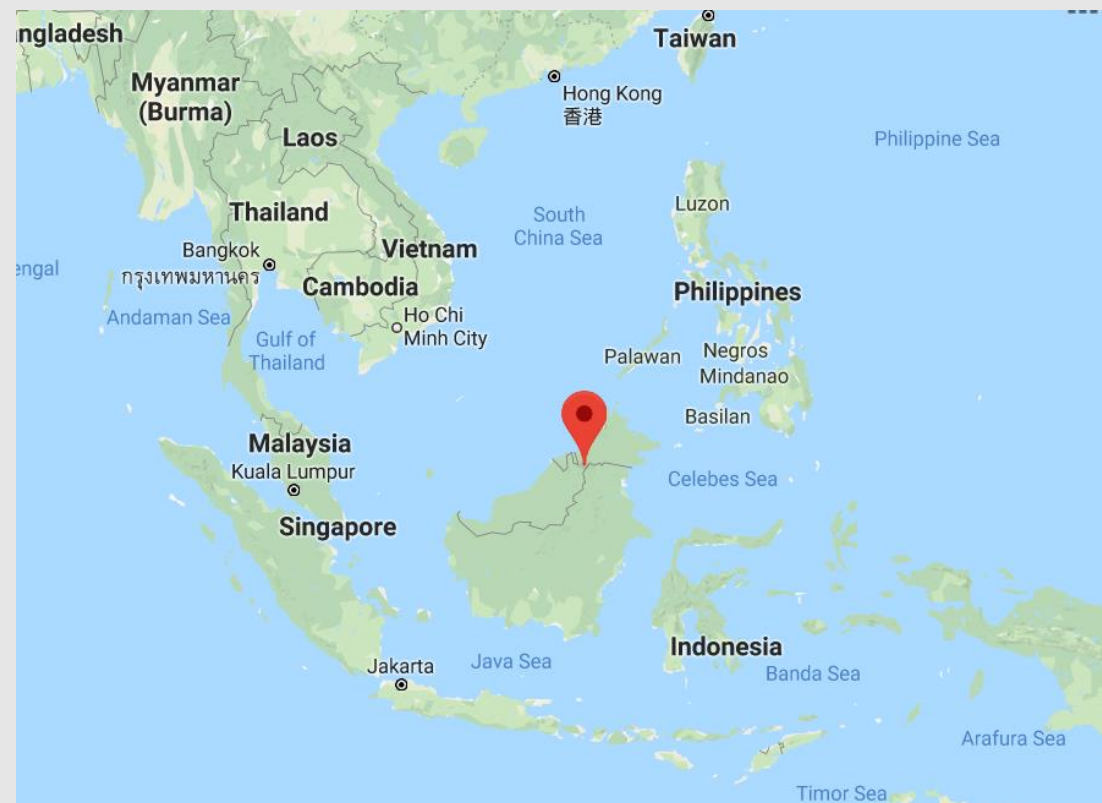
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Kelabit and Sa'ban



Kelabit and Sa'ban

- **Kelabit** and **Sa'ban** are two WAn languages spoken in Northern Sarawak, Malaysia. They belong to the **Apad Uat** subgroup.
- Data is taken from fieldwork in **Bario** (2013-17) and **Long Banga** (2017) and Beatrice Clayre's published/unpublished fieldnotes.
- They both have **WAn verbal morphology**
- But they differ in their **morphosyntactic properties** → transitional between **Philippine-type** and **Indonesian-type** (Clayre 2005, 2014)



Kelabit



(1a) **Actor Voice**
La'ih sineh **ne-nekul** *nuba'* *nedih* ngen seduk
man DEM PFV-AV.spoon rice 3SG.POSS with spoon
'That man spooned up his rice with a spoon'

The sentences encode the same notionally transitive event

(1b) **Undergoer Voice**
sikul *lai'h* *sineh* nuba' nedih ngen seduk
<UV.PFV>spoon man DEM rice 3SG.POSS with spoon
'That man spooned up his rice with a spoon'

However, they differ in the **morphological marking** on the verb

(1c) **Instrumental Voice**
seduk **penekul** *la'ih* *sineh* *nuba'* *nedih*
spoon IV-spoon man DEM rice 3SG.POSS
'That man used a spoon to spoon up his rice'

And this corresponds to a different semantic being the **privileged argument**

Sa'ban



(2a) Actor Voice (AV)

Súel nah maan *bii'*.
girl that AV.eat rice
'That girl ate/eats/is eating rice'

The sentences encode the same notionally transitive event

Verbal morphology marks a different argument as privileged

2-way system of alternations

(2b) Undergoer Voice (UV)

bii' i-naan *súel nah*.
rice UV-eat girl that
'That girl ate rice'



What does WAn Verbal Morphology do?

- WAn verbal morphology encodes **symmetrical voice**

Actor Voice

Undergoer Voice

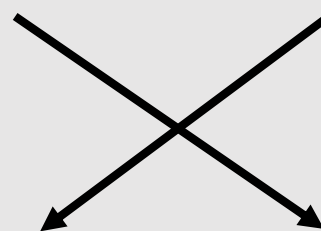
Semantic Roles

A

U

A

U



Syntactic Functions

SUBJ

CORE

SUBJ

CORE

Transitive

Transitive

controversial!

- Rare...
- Split subject properties



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The Subject Debate

Subjects

- Subjects are often defined as having a set of **morphosyntactic properties** (Keenan 1976, Falk 2006)
- **Quirky case** has led to the conclusion that coding doesn't always define GFs
- However, in WAn behavioural properties are also “split” between the **actor** and the **privileged argument**

Coding	Behaviour
Unmarked Case	Imperative Addressee
Agreement	Reflexive Binding
	Switch Reference Systems
	Co-ordination
	Controlled Argument (PRO)
	Raising
	Extraction
	Obligatory Element
	Wide Scope
	Discourse Topic



Kelabit Relativisation

- (3a) **AV** Seni'er kuh la'ih [suk ____ ne-nekul *nuba'* ngen seduk]
 UV.PFV.see 1SG man REL PFV-AV.spoon rice with spoon
 'I saw the man who spooned up rice with a spoon'
- (3b) *Seni'er kuh *nuba'* [suk nekul ____ la'ih sineh]
 UV.PFV.see 1SG rice REL AV.spoon man DEM
- (3c) **UV** Seni'er kuh nuba' [suk ____ sikul *la'ih sineh* ngen seduk]
 UV.PFV.see 1SG rice REL UV.PFV.spoon man DEM with spoon
 'I saw the rice that the man spooned up with a spoon'
- (3d) *Seni'er kuh *la'ih* [suk sikul ____ nuba']
 UV.PFV.see 1SG man REL UV.PFV.spoon rice

Sa'ban Relativisation



- (4a) **AV** Nai súel
girl [nok mraai *wei'* *nyeh* ina]
DEM REL AV.give fruit to.3SG earlier
'This is the girl that gave fruit to her earlier.'
- (4b) *Nai *wei'* [nok mraai súel nah *nyeh* ina]
DEM fruit REL AV.give girl DEM to.3SG earlier
- (4c) **UV** Nai wei'
fruit [nok iraaí *súel* *nah* *nyeh* ina]
DEM REL UV.give girl DEM to.3SG earlier
'This is the fruit that the girl gave to her earlier.'
- (4d) *Nai *súel* [nok iraaí wei' *nyeh* ina]
DEM girl REL UV.give fruit to.3SG earlier

Conclusion



Only the privileged argument can be **relativized on**

privileged argument = subject

Kelabit Reflexive Binding



(5a) Actor Voice

Uih ne-mada' *burur kudih* ngedeh
1SG PFV-AV.show body 1SG.POSS to.3PL
'I surrendered myself to them.'

(5c) Undergoer Voice

Binada' kuh burur kudih ngedeh
UV.PFV.show 1SG body 1SG.POSS to.3PL
'I surrendered myself to them.'

Sa'ban Reflexive Binding



(6a) Actor Voice

Éek madei' *brúel éek* ndeh
1SG AV.show body 1SG to.3PL

'I showed myself to them.'

(6c) Undergoer Voice

Yadei' éek brúel éek ndeh
UV.show 1SG body 1SG to.3PL

'I showed myself to them.'

Conclusion



The actor controls **reflexive binding** regardless of whether it is privileged or not

actor = subject



Systematic Split (Falk 2006)

Type 1 Properties	Type 2 Properties
Agent argument in active voice	Shared argument in co-ordinated clauses
Most likely covert argument	Raising
The addressee of an imperative	Extraction
Anaphoric prominence	Obligatory element
Switch reference systems	“External” structural position
Controlled argument (PRO) for some languages	Controlled argument (PRO) for some languages
Discourse topic	Definiteness/wide scope



Actor Semantic Role



Privileged Argument



What does this mean for subjects?

- There have been three main approaches to the **split**:

(1) Western Austronesian languages do **not have subjects** (Schachter 1976)

➤ There is no subject - the privileged argument is a **topic**

(2) Only **Type 1 properties** identify subjects (Aldridge 2004)

➤ The **actor is subject** – the privileged argument is a **topic/absolute**

(3) Only **Type 2 properties** identify subjects (Manning 1996, Manning & Sag 1998)

➤ The privileged argument is **subject** - binding controlled by **actor**



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Privileged Argument as Subject



Privileged Argument as Subject?

- In addition to extraction (relativisation, cleft constructions) there are a number of **subject properties** unique to privileged arguments

	Kelabit	Sa'ban
Particles	✓	✓
Relativisation	✓	✓
External position	✓	✓
wh-questions	✓	✓
Raising	✓	?
Control	✓	? (just actor?)
Shared argument in co-ordination	? not limited to subjects	



Particles in Sa'ban

(8a) Actor Voice

Pi maan *wei'* nah
 alreadyAV.eat fruit DEM

[nah	<u>aka</u>	ai]
PT	wild.boar	PT

'The wild boar has already eaten the fruit'

Particles can only precede privileged arguments

(8b) *pi maan [nah *wei'* ai] aka nah

(8c) Undergoer Voice

Pi inaan *aka* nah
 Already uv.eat wild.boar DEM

[nah	<u>wei'</u>	ai]
PT	fruit	PT

'The wild boar has already eaten the fruit'

(8d) *pi inaan [nah *aka* ai] wei' nah



Kelabit External Position

(11a) **Actor Voice**
La'ih sineh nenekul *nuba'* ngen tekul ngimalem
 man DEM AV.PFV.spoon rice with spoon yesterday
 'The man spooned up rice with a spoon yesterday'

Only privileged arguments appear pre-verbally

(11b) **nuba'* nenekul la'ih sineh ngen tekul ngimalem

(11c) **Undergoer Voice**
Nuba' sikul *la'ih* *sineh* ngen tekul ngimalem
 rice UV.PFV.spoon man DEM with spoon yesterday
 'The man spooned up the rice with a spoon yesterday.'

(11d) **la'ih* *sineh* sikul nuba' ngen tekul ngimalem



Sa'ban wh-questions

(15a) **Actor Voice**
Aai maan *bii'* *nah?*
 who AV.eat rice DEM
 'Who is eating that rice?'

(15b) **noon* maan ceh?

(15c) **Undergoer Voice**
Noon nan *ceh* *nah?*
 what UV.eat 2SG DEM
 'What are you eating?'

(15d) **aai* nan bii'?

Privileged arguments are questioned
 via wh-fronting... non-privileged
 arguments are questioned *in-situ*



Raising in Kelabit

(16a) **Actor Voice**

Uih ngelinuh
1SG AV.think

<u>ieh</u>	tu'uh-tu'uh	[nekuman
3SG	real-REDUP	AV.PFV.eat

nuba'
rice

only privileged arguments can be raised

'I thought him truly to have eaten his rice yesterday'

(16b) *Uih ngelinuh

nuba' tu'uh-tu'uh [nekuman

ieh ngimalem]

(16c) **Undergoer Voice**

Uih ngelinuh
1SG AV.PFV.think

<u>nuba'</u>	tu'uh-tu'uh	[kinan
rice	real-REDUP	UV.PFV.eat

neh ngimalem]
3SG yesterday

'I thought the rice truly to have been eaten by him yesterday'

(16d) *Uih ngelinuh

ieh tu'uh-tu'uh [kinan

nuba' ngimalem]

Summary



The privileged argument has the **Type 2 properties**
expected of subjects in both languages



Privileged Argument as Topic



Privileged Argument as Topic?

- The main alternative to treating the privileged argument as subject is to treat it as a **topic**.
- Topics have been defined in the literature in a number of different ways. Two particularly prominent notions are:
 - **Discourse Topics** – central referents with high topic continuity (Cooreman, Fox and Givon 1984)
 - **Information Structure Topics** – identifiable/aboutness (Lambrecht 1994)
- The **UV undergoer** does not (necessarily) fit either of these definitions!



Kelabit UV in Discourse

(27) Nalap *neh* pupu'
 UV.PFV.fetch 3SG hitting.implement
 'She fetched something to hit with'

It is the actor that has high discourse continuity and is expressed as a pronoun!

Nukab *neh* bubpu' daan
 UV.PFV.open 3SG door hut
 'Opened the door to the hut'

the undergoers are variously non-specific, indefinite and/or not important in the discourse.

Nalap *neh* edteh kayuh
 UV.PFV.fetch 3SG one stick
 'Picked up a piece of wood'



Sa'ban UV in Discourse

(28) Pi aroo' *Pwaal Payaau* ntan-ntan pat yeh
 after UV.do Tree Shrew steer-REDUP bottom 3SG

Mai seu taloon Beladiin ai ngaai
 Go towards cloth tortoise DEM there

'Then the Tree Shrew turned his bottom around to face Tortoise's cloth'

Yaden *yeh* ta'é' yeh wan yeh.
 UV.push 3SG excretion 3SG on 3SG

'And emptied his bowels onto it.'

This is about
 the actor... not
 the undergoer!



Quantitative Measures

- In Kelabit and Sa'ban folk tales, actors have higher measures for **referential distance** and **topical persistence** than undergoers in uv in both languages (see Hemmings 2017):

RD	Actor		Undergoer		Total No.
	High (1-3)	Low (>3)	High (1-3)	Low (>3)	
Kelabit	49 (92%)	5 (8%)	36 (68%)	17 (32%)	53
Sa'ban	58 (95%)	3 (5%)	49 (80%)	12 (20%)	61

TP	Actor		Undergoer		Total No.
	High (>2)	Low (0-2)	High (>2)	Low (0-2)	
Kelabit	41 (77%)	12 (23%)	23 (43%)	30 (57%)	53
Sa'ban	52 (85%)	9 (15%)	32 (52%)	29 (48%)	61

Summary



The privileged undergoer in UV does not appear to be the **discourse topic** in Kelabit or Sa'ban

Is it the **information structure topic**?



Information Structure Topics

- The UV actor can be the information structure topic, as shown by the fact that it is possible for a UV clause to follow an actor as an overt hanging topic:

(29a) **Paul kedieh,** kinan *neh* bua' ebpuk
Paul 3SG.EMPH UV.PFV.eat 3SG.GEN passionfruit
'As for Paul, he ate the passion fruit'

The actor is the
topic!



Privileged Argument as Focus

- Moreover, the privileged argument can have the role of **focus** when it appears pre-verbally as shown by **question-answer** pairs:

(30a) Undergoer Voice

Q. Enun seni'er *muh*?
 what UV.PFV.see 2SG
 'What did you see?'

A. Edteh wayang sen'ier *kuh* na'ah
 one video UV.PFV.see 1SG before
 'I just saw a video...'

(30b) Actor Voice

Q. lih suk kuman *buah' kabere sineh*?
 who REL AV.eat fruit pineapple DEM
 'Who is eating that pineapple?'

A. Peter suk kuman *buah' kabere sineh*
 Peter REL AV.eat fruit pineapple DEM
 'Peter is eating that pineapple.'

The privileged argument
is focus!

Summary



The privileged appears to be underspecified for its **information structure** role

Hence, there are good arguments for treating it as a **subject** and against treating it as a **topic**



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Non-privileged Actor as Object

Actor as Object?



- Finally, there are also arguments for treating the **UV actor** as an **object** (or non-subject core argument) rather than a subject
- This argues against the ‘**actor as subject**’ approach.
- The same arguments also support identifying the **AV undergoer** as a **core argument**
- Hence, they argue against an ergative analysis in which AV is an **intransitive antipassive** construction.



AV Undergoer and UV Actor Core Properties

- The **AV Undergoer** and **UV Actor** share the following properties which distinguish them both from **subjects** and **obliques**

	Kelabit	Sa'ban
NP rather than PP	✓	✓
Post-verbal position	✓	✓
No subject properties	✓	✓
No fronting	✓	✓



Sa'ban NPs

- Obliques and adjuncts are typically **prepositional phrases**, whilst both non-privileged actors and undergoers are **NPs**:

(32a) Actor Voice

Súel nah mraai brée [ngaan anaak yeh]_{pp}
 girl DEM AV.give rice to child 3SG

'The girl gave rice to her child'

AV undergoers and UV
actors are not coded
like obliques

(32b) Undergoer Voice

Brée iraaí súel nah [ngaan anaak yeh]_{pp}
 rice UV.give girl DEM to child 3SG

'The girl gave rice to her child'



Kelabit - post-verbal position (core args)

(34a) Actor Voice

La'ih sineh ne-kuman (*ngimalem) *buah* *kaber*
 man DEM PFV-AV.eat (yesterday) fruit pineapple

For: 'I ate pineapple yesterday'

(34b) Undergoer Voice

Kinan (*ngimalem) *la'ih* *sineh* *buah kaber* *sineh*
 UV.PFV.eat (yesterday) man DEM fruit pineapple DEM

For: 'The man ate that pineapple yesterday.'

Both the AV
 undergoer and UV
 actor cannot be
 separated from
 the verb by
 adjuncts of time



Kelabit - post-verbal position (obliques)

(34c) Actor Voice

La'ih sineh nenekul *nuba'* (ngimalem) ngen tekul
 man DEM AV.PFV.spoon rice yesterday with spoon
 'The man spooned up rice yesterday with a spoon'

Hence, neither the
 AV undergoer nor
 UV actor patterns
 like an oblique

(34d) Undergoer Voice

Nuba' sikul *la'ih* *sineh* (ngimalem) ngen tekul
 rice UV.PFV.spoon man DEM yesterday with spoon
 'The man spooned up the rice yesterday with a spoon'



Sa'ban – Fronting (core args)

(39a) Actor Voice

**bii'*, *súel nah* maan
 rice girl DEM AV.eat

For: 'rice, the girl ate'

The AV undergoer and UV actor cannot be fronted before a pre-verbal subject

(39c) Undergoer Voice

**súel nah*, *bii' nah* inaan
 girl DEM rice DEM UV.eat

For: 'the girl, rice was eaten by her'



Sa'ban – Fronting (adjuncts/obliques)

(24b) Actor Voice

Ngaan anaak yeh ai, súel nah mraai brée
 To child 3SG DEM girl dem av.give rice

'To her child, the girl gave rice'

Neither the AV
 undergoer nor
 UV actor patterns
 like an oblique

(24d) Undergoer Voice

Ngaan anaak yeh ai, brée iraaí *súel nah*
 To child 3SG DEM rice uv.give girl dem

'To her child, the girl gave rice'

Summary



The UV actor looks more like an **object** (non-subject core argument) than a **subject!** (against actor = subject)

The AV undergoer looks like an **object** rather than an **oblique** (against the ergative analysis)

Summary

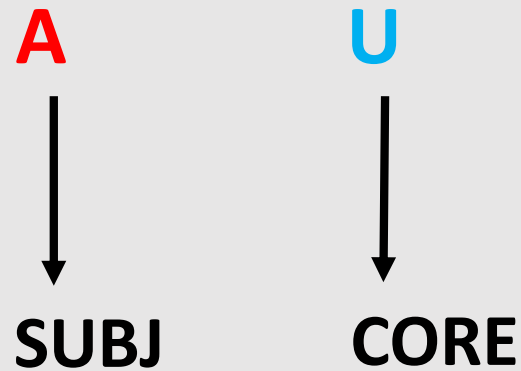
- Hence, we have motivated the following analysis of **argument to function mappings** in the different voice constructions (verbal forms):

Actor Voice

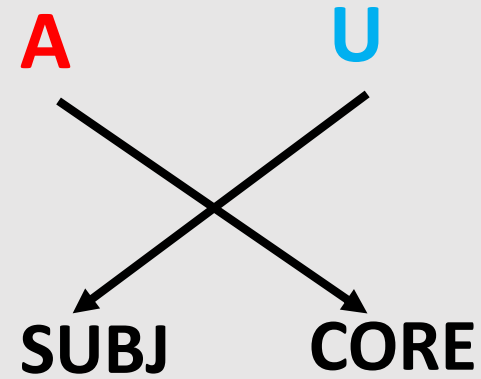
Undergoer Voice

Semantic Roles

Syntactic Functions



Transitive



Transitive



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Conclusion

Conclusion

- In this paper, I have presented three main arguments for treating the **privileged argument** as **subject** in Kelabit and Sa'ban:
 1. They have a range of cross-linguistic '**subject properties**' that distinguish them from other arguments in the clause
 2. They do not appear to have the cross-linguistic properties expected of **discourse or information structure topics**
 3. The non-privileged actor behaves like an **object** than subject.

Conclusion



- This has several **important implications**:
 - It supports the idea that **verbal morphology** encodes an alternation in the mapping of arguments to functions and results in multiple transitive clauses.
 - Hence, it suggests that the best analysis of the data is **symmetrical voice**
 - And demonstrates the **importance of identifying grammatical functions** in Western Austronesian languages as a necessary precursor to understanding the true nature of the verbal morphology

Conclusion



- It further suggests that Western Austronesian languages and the split in subject properties need not refute the notion of ‘subject’ being a **universal grammatical function**.
- Rather, they imply the need to **refine the definition** on the basis of a more typologically varied set of languages (following the Manning/Kroeger approach).
- Hence, this work makes an important contribution to our understanding of grammatical functions and Austronesian voice systems and highlights the importance of developing theoretical models that can account for the **typological facts**.



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Many Thanks!