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Sunday, March 30th: 11:45-12:15

Transitivity from the Intransitive: Evidence from Banjar

In this paper I argue that argument structure in Banjar is reflected in its verbal morphology. Banjar is an Austronesian language spoken on Borneo and is closely related to Indonesian. Active verbs can be represented in three ways -- (i) bare root: *duduk* 'sit down', (ii) *ba*+root: *badiam* 'live', (iii) *maN*+root: *manamu* 'meet'.

I claim that bare roots are unaccusative, that *ba-* is needed for the addition of an external argument (with an agent theta-role), and that *maN-* is in fact *ba-* plus a nasal morpheme *N-* whose purpose is to assign accusative case. The nasal *N-* spreads left and then nasalises *ba-*, resulting in the surface form *maN-*. The following example illustrates the procedure: *tutup* 'close' > *ntutup* > *ba-ntutup* > *manutup* 'close.'

Consequently, verbs with *ba-* behave as unergatives, while verbs with *maN-* are transitive. I show numerous examples of unergative verbs with *ba-* that, when they occur with an internal argument, are prefixed with the transitive *maN-*. For example, *baburu* 'hunt' is contrasted with *mamburu* 'to hunt something.' I also explain that transitive verbs, when made intransitive through reciprocal events, have *ba-* instead of *maN-*. Compare the following two sentences:

- (1) a. *Inya malihat kambang* b. *Utuh dan Diang balihatan*
3s MAN.see flower U. and D. BA.see.AN
'She sees a flower.' 'U. and D. see each other.'

Further, this view predicts that verbs with transitive suffixes such as *-i* and *-akan* never occur with *ba-* (eg. *malukai* 'make someone bleed, never **balukai*), lending further credence to the idea that *ba-* is a marker for intransitivity. Consequently, just as the argument structure of intransitive (unergative) verbs can be seen as underlying the transitive structure – in that unergatives have an external argument but no direct internal argument (unlike transitive verbs that have both) – so can the morphology of the two types of verbs in Banjar, where the unergative *ba-* morpheme combines with the case marker *N-* to form the transitive morpheme *maN-*.

Probably because of its decreased productivity in other related languages such as Indonesian, this morphological pattern has not been shown before. In Indonesian, verbs in the active voice are often preceded by the prefixes *ber-* or *meN-*. While some authors (eg. Chung 1976) have called them respectively intransitive and transitive markers, others (eg. Voskuil 1996) have argued that the distinction is not productive in Indonesian. Therefore, these findings show a unified view of a language's deeper structure and its surface morphology, bridging the syntax with semantics and phonology.

References

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