

Voice in Gayo, a language of northern Sumatra

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ABSTRACT:

Many of the languages in western Indonesia exhibit what are generally referred to as symmetrical voice systems. These can be defined as voice systems that exhibit at least two voice alternations marked on the verb, neither of which is clearly the basic form (Himmelman 2005:3). In contrast with the more familiar voice systems of European languages where voice alternations are tied to alternations in the morpho-syntactic transitivity, syntactic transitivity distinctions are largely irrelevant in accounting for the function of symmetrical voice systems (Himmelman 2005:59-60).

Gayo is a Malayo-Polynesian language which features a western-Indonesian type symmetrical voice system, and is a Polynesian language. It is spoken in the Aceh province of Indonesia. The presence of voice in Gayo distinguishes it from the neighbouring Acehese language, which exhibits a Split-S system of alignment (Durie 1985). In Gayo, voice involves the assignment of semantic roles to the grammatical subject of a clause which specifies events involving two or more participants. Voice alternations are signaled by means of verbal prefixes (Actor orientation: *mun-*; Undergoer orientation: *i-*):

- (1) a. [I-tos=è] [wu=ne]_{SUBJ}.
UO-make=3.OBJ fish.trap=earlier
'He made the fish trap.'
- b. [Ama]_{SUBJ} [munos wu].
1 AO:make fish.trap
'Father is making a fish trap.'

In this presentation, it is shown that voice in Gayo exhibits a number of characteristics which show that the category of voice in Gayo is based on semantic factors rather than on syntactic considerations: i) Active predicates are (in unmarked clauses) morpho-syntactically intransitive; ii) Actor voice morphology is restricted to certain semantic types of events (imperfective, intentional, volitional); iii) actor voice (and to some extent undergoer voice) affixes are attached to nominal and verbal bases to derive new lexemes. The correlation between voice marking and transitivity in Gayo are examined, and the Gayo facts are placed within the broader context of western Indonesian voice typology.

References:

- Durie, Mark. 1985. *A Grammar of Acehese on the Basis of a Dialect of North Aceh*. Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde
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