

Voice in Gayo, a language of northern Sumatra

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1. Introduction

Austronesian languages are remarkable for their distinctive voice systems. An important sub-group of Austronesian languages are the “Indonesian type” languages spoken in the western part of Indonesia. These languages are characterised by the presence of *symmetrical voice* systems (Arka 2002; Arka & Ross 2005; Himmelmann 2005), which involve “at least two voice alternations marked on the verb, neither of which is clearly the basic form.” (Himmelmann 2005:3). Indonesian-type languages also generally contain true passive constructions, in which an agentive argument is demoted to oblique status and is thus marked in relation to its active alternant (Arka 2002:3).

A number of languages of northern Sumatra feature symmetrical voice systems, but lack true passive constructions. Examples of such languages include Toba Batak (Schachter 1984) and Karo Batak (Woollams 1996). In addition to their more purely voice-like function of indicating the semantic role of the grammatical subject, voice in these languages is also associated with aspectual meanings and other semantically-based information not generally associated with voice in languages spoken in other parts of the world. The distinct nature of voice in Indonesian-type languages has led to a range of contrasting analyses of the form and function of this phenomenon. The present article is a contribution to this discussion.

Here we outline a number of important characteristics of the voice system of Gayo, a language spoken in the highlands of the Indonesian province of Aceh. Gayo features a symmetrical voice system typical of languages in western Indonesia, but like the Batak languages spoken in neighbouring regions, it has no true passive construction. The basic voice alternation in Gayo is illustrated in examples (1) and (2):

- (1) *[I-tos=è]* *[wu=ne]_{SUBJ}*
 UV-make=3.N.SUBJ fish.trap=earlier
 ‘He made the fish trap.’

- (2) *[Ama]_{SUBJ}* *[munos=è]*.
 1 AV:make=3.N.SUBJ
 ‘Father made it.’

These examples show that voice in Gayo follows a strategy common to many Indonesian languages, whereby the semantic role of the grammatical subject is specified by means of a voice prefix attached to the verb. In (1a), the Undergoer Voice (UV) prefix *i-* indicates that the subject is an Undergoer, and in (1b), the Actor Voice (AV) prefix *mun-* indicates that it is an Actor. The Non-Subject (= grammatical object) argument immediately follows the verb, forming a complex VP. These examples show that both UV and AV are morphologically marked, and therefore neither alignment can be considered the basic or unmarked alignment. In syntactic terms, both the voice alignments contain two direct arguments, and so again one alignment cannot easily be considered to be the basic alignment in relation to the other.

A prominent topic of debate in the literature concerning the Indonesian voice systems has been the extent to which each voice system can truly be considered ‘symmetrical’. Some

studies have shown that a given language may be more skewed towards UV as the more basic alignment according to various different parameters (e.g. morphology, syntax, discourse frequency). Some have argued, for example, that Balinese shows an ergative alignment due to the fact that AV verbs are marked by the prefix N- but UV predicates are unmarked, and therefore more basic (e.g. Wechsler & Arka 1998).

According to Himmelmann (2005), a problematic aspect of ergativity hypotheses is that Austronesian languages such as Balinese share very few other typological characteristics with ergative languages spoken in other parts of the world, and so positing an ergative analysis for languages such as Balinese is of comparatively little typological import (2005:59) The reason for this, he argues, is that the notion of ergativity or accusativity in language presupposes clear distinction between transitive and intransitive constructions. In Austronesian languages, (syntactic) transitivity is generally not clearly grammaticised. An alternative analysis put forward in this light is that the voice system of Balinese has more in common with Split-S systems, which are based on largely semantic factors. Clynes (1995) argues that in Singaraja Balinese nasal and non-nasal are not sensitive to transitivity distinctions, but rather agency and non-agency. Accordingly, he analyses Balinese as a kind of split-S system.

The aim of the present contribution is to identify and describe several important characteristics of Gayo morpho-syntax, with a focus on the voice system of the language. It is shown that the identification of accusativity or ergativity does not appear to be a relevant question when describing the Gayo grammatical system. This is due to the fact that voice marking in Gayo is indicative of primarily semantic information. This is in contrast with ‘asymmetrical’ systems such as in English, where voice is based on information concerning syntactic relations. The discussion of the form and function of voice in Gayo in the following sections draws mostly upon data originally published in Eades (2005).

2. Lexical and syntactic categories

Gayo, like many Austronesian languages, exhibits fewer formal distinctions between the major categories of noun and verb than in the more familiar languages of Europe, and there is no separate category of adjectives. Nouns are not inflected for number, plurality or definiteness, and a single given form may be used in different syntactic slots in sentences. Verbs can be either affixed or unaffixed. Unaffixed verbs have strictly stative meanings when used predicatively, and as verbal nominalizations when used as arguments. This is demonstrated in example (3), where *pané* ‘clever’ functions as a predicate. In example (4), the same form functions as the head of an NP.

(3) *Gère pané wè.*
not clever 3
‘He isn’t clever.’

(4) *Malè i-turuh-en [pané ni pawang].*
will UV-show-CAUS1 clever POSS hunter
‘The cleverness (i.e. skill) of the hunter will be revealed.’ (IK:48)

Affixed verbs refer to actions (and some states). Two types of affixes can be identified in Gayo: i) intransitive affixes, which code various different types of semantic events, and ii) voice affixes, which identify the role of a grammatical subject as either Actor or Undergoer. Many verb roots (bound roots) require affixation in order to function as predicates, while such roots can be unaffixed when they occur in nominalisations. This apparently contradicts the tendency cross-linguistically for nominalised verbs to be represented by morphologically derived forms (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1993). For example, in (5) the verb *mu-sangka* ‘run’

functions as a predicate, taking the intransitive prefix *mu-*; while in (6), the root functions as the head of a NP, and is unaffixed:

- (5) *Mu-sangka pôn=é=ne.*
 INTR-run uncle=3.POSS=earlier
 ‘His uncle ran.’
- (6) *Kuneh pè [sangka ni akang], turun=é ku palôh.*
 how also/even run POSS deer descend=3.POSS to downhill
 ‘However the running of the deer (would be), it would go downhill.’

In addition to the root forms of verbs being used as NPs, affixed verbs can also be used in argument slots in the sentence to convey gerundive meanings, without any further affixation that indicates this is a derived or non-basic function. In example (7), the verb *mangan* ‘to eat’ is the complement of a preposition, and in (8) *mune-hèk-i* ‘to tire, wear out’ functions as the argument of a predicating verb. Both nominalisations are marked with AV morphology:

- (7) *[Mu-torop] mari [mangan] kemali.*
 INTR-burp after AV:eat taboo
 ‘Burping after eating is taboo.’
- (8) *[Mune-hèk-i] beluh ku Bintang.*
 AV-tired-APPL go to Bintang
 ‘(It’s) tiring going to Bintang.’ (*hèk-i* ‘to tire (VT)’)

In sum, AV constructions in Gayo may function as either predicates or arguments of verbs, and there is no grammatical evidence to suggest that one of these uses is more basic than the other. As such, voice marking is not indicative of syntactic information as in languages such as English. Another way in which voice in Gayo is distinguished from the ‘asymmetrical’ (nominative-accusative, ergative-absolutive) systems, is that its voice alternations are not tied to information about transitivity. This is discussed in the next section.

3. Voice marking and transitivity

Voice-marked clauses consist of a subject argument and a VP that contains a predicating verb marked by one of three voice prefixes as well as a non-subject NP. As in many other Indonesian languages, there are two types of UV predicates in Gayo, which are illustrated in examples (9) and (10). Example (9) contains an UV predicate, and (10) a decontrol UV predicate (*ter-*). In UV clauses, the canonical position of the subject is following the verb.

- (9) *I-pangan ama dengké=a.* Undergoer Voice
 UV-eat father meat=that
 ‘Father ate the meat.’
- (10) *Te-pangan ama dengké=a.* Decontrol Undergoer Voice
 DC.UV-eat father meat=that
 ‘Father accidentally ate the (i.e. wrong) meat.’

In contrast with UV predicates, AV predicates are usually (syntactically) intransitive. The Undergoer specified in the verbal semantics is typically either implied or expressed as an

incorporated noun (non-argument). Predicates taking two direct arguments are almost always UV. The only situation in which AV takes two arguments is in non-canonical clauses, typically clause-combining operations such as relativisation and equi-NP deletion. Example (11) contains a cleft construction. The gap in the relative clause is an Actor, and so AV morphology is triggered on the verb:

- (11) *Ama si mumangan dengké=a.* Actor Voice
 father REL AV:eat meat=that
 ‘It was Father who ate the meat.’

In describing the grammatical system of Balinese, Clynes (1995) remarked that it is useful to distinguish between syntactic and semantic notions of transitivity (cf. Givon 1990; Hopper & Thompson 1980). A similar distinction can be made in Gayo, where syntactic transitivity, i.e. the number of direct arguments in a clause, does not necessarily coincide with transitivity in the semantic sense originally outlined by Hopper and Thompson (1980). Only semantic participants with individuated reference surface in the syntax as direct arguments. Thus, while AV and UV predicates refer to events involving two semantic participants (Actor and Undergoer), it does not necessarily follow that both participants surface as syntactic arguments within the clause. In the following sections, transitivity is discussed with respect to AV and UV predicates respectively.

3.1 AV and transitivity

The AV prefix typically marks syntactically intransitive predicates in which a non-individuated Undergoer is implied. These verbs specify imperfective events in which the Actor participant carries out the act intentionally. Consider example (12):

- (12) *Jema si biasa be-judi, mun-ôsh, munipu, mun-unuh i*
 person REL usually MID-gamble AV-steal AV:lie AV-kill LOC
sonè muloi tobat.
 there begin repent
 ‘People who usually gambled, stole, lied, and killed, at that place they’ll repent.’

There are a number of ways in which a non-individuated Undergoer may be expressed in an intransitive AV clause. Some of these strategies are outlined in the following:

i) *Mun-* can attach to roots which are unambiguously intransitive, forming, for example, verbs such as *mun-awé* ‘swim’, *muminah* ‘move’ and *munomé* ‘lie down, go to bed’. The undergoer could possibly be understood in a reflexive sense, i.e. the act is performed on ‘oneself’. Consider example (13):

- (13) *Aku pè mu-niri mulo.*
 I also/even AV-bathe first
 ‘I’ll just bathe first.’

ii) An undergoer in an AV clause may be realised as an oblique argument, as demonstrated in example (14):

- (14) *Aku munengé ku ling=é.*
 I AV:hear to voice=3.POSS
 ‘I was listening to what he said.’ (lit. ‘I was listening to his voice.’)

iii) The AV prefix *mun-* is also productively attached to nouns to derive intransitive verbs. The derived verb refers to the action typically associated with what is specified by the nominal base, e.g. *mungëber* ‘tell news’ (*këber* ‘news’), *mune-sop* ‘make soup’ (*sop* ‘soup’), and *munyupu* ‘make a roof’ (*supu* ‘roof’). Consider example (15):

- (15) *Ine tengah munyecah*
 mother CONT AV:spiced.vegetables
 ‘Mother is making spiced vegetables.’ (*cecah* ‘spiced vegetables’ (N))

iv) A frequently-used strategy by which a non-individuated Undergoer is coded in AV clauses is incorporation. Several different types of incorporation strategies occur in Gayo. The following is an example:

- (16) *Munyuen kepile paké=a i uken so.*
 AO:plant sweet.potato 3.PL=that LOC upstream yon
 ‘They were planting sweet potatoes upstream.’ but *‘They planted those sweet potatoes upstream.’

The preceding facts reflect a more general tendency in Gayo for the clause to involve a greater number of participants, i.e. semantic roles selected by the verb, than are realised as syntactic arguments. The general syntactic simplicity of the clause in Gayo correlates with the fact that verbal morphology largely conveys semantic information rather than information about syntactic relations.

3.2 UV and transitivity

In contrast with AV predicates, UV predicates typically take two syntactic arguments. However, UV predicates may be intransitive. A UV clause without a Non-Subject argument specifies an agentless passive meaning. In these clauses, the reference of the Non-Subject argument is not recoverable to the hearer, and such clauses can therefore be analysed as syntactically intransitive. Consider example (18):

- (18) *I-rebah-an uyem. I-tik uyem=a i-awè-n.*
 UO-fall-CAUS1 pine.tree UO-raise pine.tree=that UO-swim-CAUS1
 ‘The pine trees were felled. Then those pine trees were picked up and floated (on the river).’

Like AV verbs, the UV prefix *i-* can derive verbs from nominal bases. Consider example (19), in which the verbal derivation specifies that the referent of the subject is ‘made into’ the substance specified by the affixed noun. As in example (18), this sentence is intransitive:

- (19) *Uah ni lukup i-cecah.*
 fruit POSS wild.mango UO-spicy.sauce
 ‘The wild mangoes were made into spicy sauce.’

The preceding examples show that issues of transitivity are not relevant to the function of symmetrical voice systems as syntactic transitivity in Gayo is not grammaticised in the morpho-syntax. Rather, the function of voice is associated with semantic factors pertaining to

aspect and volition. The semantic properties associated with voice in Gayo are discussed in the next section.

4. The semantics of voice marking in Gayo

In addition to its voice function (i.e. assigning a semantic role to the grammatical subject), voice in Gayo is also associated with aspectual meaning (perfective/imperfective). This function has been reported for the Batak languages of northern Sumatra (Schachter 1984; Woollams 1987). UV predicates typically have a perfective reading, as shown in example (20):

- (20) *I-tos=è* *penan=ne.*
 UV-make=3.N. SUBJ cake=earlier
 ‘(S)he made the cake’ but: ‘*(S)he is making the cake.’

The AV verb, on the other hand, is associated with imperfective aspect:

- (21) *Munos penan wè.*
 AO:make cake 3
 ‘(S)he is making cakes’ but: ‘*(S)he made a cake.’

In discourse, UV forms are frequently employed in narratives that outline a sequence of completed events that follow each other. Example (5) contains an excerpt of a woman relating her experience at the market:

- (22) *Ku-osah ke sèn se=ribu, gère i-ulak-n=è.*
 UO.1-give BCKGR money one=thousand not UO-return-CAUS1=3.N.SUBJ
Ku-peré-n “Uén! Ini we sèn=ku lime ratus dih,”
 UO.1-say-CAUS1 boy this EMPH money=1.POSS five hundred just
ken aku.
 say 1
 ‘I gave (him) one thousand (rupiyah) and he didn’t return (anything). I said,
 “Boy! this is my money, five hundred please,” I said.’

While AV and UV verbs correlate with imperfective and perfective aspect, the use of voice marking is in general terms restricted to certain semantic types of events. Verbs bearing AV and UV morphology specify intentional, volitional acts involving two participants. Two-participant states of affairs which do not conform to these semantic criteria are coded by other means. Two of these are as follows:

i) Emotional or psychological states involving two participants (experiencer and stimulus) are coded by a special type of subjectless predicate in which the Actor (experiencer) is expressed as a bound possessor of the noun *até* ‘liver, seat of the emotions’. Such verbs include *galak* ‘be happy; like’, *ues* ‘be sad’, and *geli* ‘be hateful’. The stimulus is coded by an oblique argument. Consider example (23):

- (23) *Galak atè=ngku kin wè.*
 be.happy liver=1.POSS DAT 3
 ‘I like her.’ (=my liver is happy towards her.)

ii) In addition to voice affixes, there are seven other verbal affixes which are employed to specify a range of meanings, a number of which can code two-participant events. These include reciprocal or ‘middle’ states of affairs, meanings of ingestion, uncontrolled acts, and other states of affairs involving two participants with meanings. Consider example (24), in which the verb of ingestion *inum* ‘drink’ takes the intransitive prefix *mu-*. Here the Undergoer participant is coded as an incorporated noun:

- (24) *Wè gati m-inum kupi.*
 3 often INTR-drink coffee
 ‘He often drinks coffee.’

In sum, voice marked verbs refer to deliberate, volitional acts which involve two participants, an Actor and an Undergoer. States of affairs which do not fulfill these semantic criteria are coded by means of other strategies. In languages with more grammaticised distinctions between transitive and intransitive sentences, voice is used to code two-participant events regardless of such semantic factors.

5. Conclusion

In the preceding sections, it was shown that voice marking in Gayo is associated with certain types of semantic information in addition to its primary function of indicating the semantic role of the grammatical subject. Voice affixes are employed only on verbs specifying intentional, volitional acts, and the AV and UV are associated with imperfective and perfective aspect respectively (except where voice is used for purposes of clause combining and other non-basic clauses). The semantic nature of voice in Gayo, and the fact that voice is not associated with information about the syntactic transitivity status of the clause, brings the language into striking contrast with languages that have ‘asymmetrical’ systems such as English, in which voice is closely tied to syntactic relations. These facts demonstrate that symmetrical voice, at least with respect to Gayo, is a unique type of alignment system. As in languages with split-S systems, clear-cut transitivity distinctions are not made in the morpho-syntax of the language, and voice alternations are driven by semantic considerations.

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