

Making sense of the optionality of voice marking in Malay/Indonesian

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Many researchers, including myself, have assumed that Malay/Indonesian in its standard varieties has four basic voices, namely morphological active (1a), morphological passive (1b), bare active (2a) and bare passive (2b).

- (1) a. Dia sudah mem-baca buku itu.
'S/he has already read the book.'
- b. Buku itu sudah di-baca-nya.
'The book has already been read by him/her.'
- (2) a. Saya sudah baca buku itu.
'I have already read the book.'
- b. Buku itu sudah saya baca.
'I have already read the book.'

Assuming a base structure conforming to the predicate-internal subject hypothesis as in (3) and the common view that *meN-* is an active voice marker, the differences among the four voices can be summarised as in (4).

- (3) [_{VP} Agent v [_{VP} V Theme]]

(4)

	v	Agent		Theme
		overt expression	movement to Spec,TP	movement to Spec,TP
Morphological active	<i>meN-</i>	obligatory	obligatory	no
Bare active	∅ _{ACT-}	obligatory	obligatory	no
Morphological passive	<i>di-</i>	non-obligatory	no	non-obligatory
Bare passive	∅ _{PASS-}	obligatory	no	non-obligatory

Table (4) shows that while the difference between the two types of passives is syntactic, with only the bare passive requiring an obligatory agent, there is no syntactic difference between the two types of actives; the only difference is phonological, i.e. one has an overt voice marker and the other does not. Thus, many grammars of Malay/Indonesian note that *meN-* is optional, especially in casual speech. However, one can also call into question the popular view that *meN-* is an active voice marker. It is this possibility that I would like to pursue in this paper. Under this hypothesis, there is only one active voice marker in Malay/Indonesian, namely ∅_{ACT-}.

Two types of evidence are needed for this hypothesis to be viable. The first type is a negative one, which denies *meN-*'s status as a voice marker whereas the second type is a positive one, which suggests the existence of a null active voice marker (or non-existence of an overt active voice marker). In fact, both of them are available.

Negative evidence. Soh and Nomoto (2009, 2010) point out two aspectual effects of *meN-*: (i) situations described by sentences with *meN-* are always eventive and (ii) degree achievement sentences with *meN-* describe only atelic situations. They analyse both these facts as resulting from *meN-*'s requirement that the situation described by a sentence containing it be one with stages in the sense of Landman (1992, 2008). These aspectual effects do not follow naturally from *meN-*'s being an active voice marker. Hence, *meN-* is not be a genuine voice marker.

Positive evidence. Kartini and Nomoto (2010) claim that Malay employs a voice alternation that involves no overt voice morphology (“unvoiced voices”) in *kena* and *ter-* sentences. Importantly, this unvoiced voice alternation is the default choice in these constructions. This confirms the existence of a null active voice marker.

That *meN-* is not an active voice marker changes the typological classification of Malay/Indonesian voice system. It is not a symmetrical system as found in languages in the Philippines, where no one voice is morphologically unmarked compared to the others. Rather, it is an asymmetrical system like English and Japanese, consisting of one unmarked active voice and two passives.

I propose that the optionality of *meN-* in (Colloquial) Malay/Indonesian can be understood in the same way as that of classifiers. Specifically, they are both a way to disambiguate possible interpretations. Nomoto (2010) argues that classifiers exist to disambiguate two possible interpretations of NPs, namely object and subkind readings. Likewise, *meN-* disambiguates possible interpretations of vPs (or VoicePs), namely [+stage] and [-stage] interpretations.