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

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1. Introduction

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) Morphological voices
- a.   Dia sudah   mem-baca buku itu.
    3SG already MEN-read book that
    'S/he has already read the book.'
- b.   Buku itu sudah   di-baca-nya.
    book that already DI-read-3SG
    'The book has already been read by him/her.'

(2) Bare voices
- a.   Saya sudah baca buku itu.
    1SG already read book that
    'I have already read the book.'
- b.   Buku itu sudah   saya baca.
    book that already 1SG read
    'I have already read the book.'

Morphological voices are so called because voice is marked on the verb by the prefixes *meN-* and *di-*. On the other hand, there is no (overt) voice morphology in bare voice sentences. Instead, voice is signalled by word order: in bare active sentences, the agent precedes auxiliaries/adverbs/negation (2a) whereas in bare passive sentences, the order is the reverse and nothing can intervene between the agent and the verb (2b). There is a strong tendency that the morphological passive is used for third person agents while the bare passive is used for first and second person agents.

Researchers commonly regard the morphological voices as "genuine," "canonical" or "primary" and the bare voices as something "pseudo" or "secondary," as reflected in some of the various names given to the two types of voices:

(3) a.   Other names of morphological voices
    '*aktif jati* [genuine active]' (Asmah 2009) (morphological actives); '*pasif jati* [genuine passives]' (Asmah 2009), 'canonical passive' (Chung 1976; Guilfoyle et al. 1992), 'passive type 1' (Dardjowidjojo 1978) (morphological passives)
- b.   Other names of bare voices
    '*aktif semu* [pseudo-active]' (Asmah 2009) (bare actives); '*pasif semu* [pseudo-passive]' (Asmah 2009), 'passive type 2' (Dardjowidjojo 1978) (bare passives)

This view is obviously biased towards the formal varieties of the language. In informal speech, the bare active is by far the most preferred choice of voice. This phenomenon is usually described as omission of *meN-* in the informal varieties. I have suggested that it should be seen the other way round, that is to say, *meN-* is added in the formal varieties (Nomoto 2006). However, this is only a matter of perspectives from which one sees formal and informal varieties of Malay/Indonesian. A more substantial issue as regards the phenomenon in question is: why is it that voice marking, something so central to the verb's syntax and semantics (cf. tense and aspect), can be optional in Malay/Indonesian (in any language, for that matter)? The present study attempts to answer this question.

I claim based on my recent research (Soh and Nomoto 2009, 2010, under review; Kartini and Nomoto 2010; Nomoto and Kartini, under review; Nomoto, to appear) that *meN-* may in fact not be an active voice marker and the active voice is indicated covertly just like that of English and Japanese, and that *meN-* is optional because its function is not to mark a grammatical category but to select from available interpretations one that is compatible with it.

2. The Single Active Hypothesis

Assuming a base structure conforming to the predicate-internal subject hypothesis as in (4) (cf. Guilfoyle et al. 1992) and the common view that *meN-* is an active voice marker, the differences among the four voices can be summarised as in (5).

(4) [$_{vP}$ Agent v [$_{VP}$ V Theme]]

(5)

	v	Agent		Theme
		overt expression	movement to Spec,TP	movement to Spec,TP
Morph. active	*meN-*	obligatory	obligatory	no
Bare active	$\emptyset_{ACT}$-	obligatory	obligatory	no
Morph. passive	*di-*	non-obligatory	no	non-obligatory (?)
Bare passive	$\emptyset_{PASS}$-	obligatory	no	non-obligatory (?)

The difference between the two types of passives is clearly syntactic, with only the bare passive requiring an obligatory agent. On the other hand, there is no syntactic difference between the two types of actives; the only difference is phonological, i.e. whether or not there is an overt active voice marker. Thus, *meN-* looks indeed optional as far as syntax is concerned. This is actually a weird state of affairs. Given that voice is very basic to the verb, determining the verb's argument projection patterns, it is expected that an overt active voice marker is either always present (like Tagalog) or always absent (like English). Then, Malay *meN-* is an aberrant.

It may turn out that my assumption that voice must be consistently marked/ unmarked in a language is problematic. But let us assume that such a generalisation actually holds and see what consequences will follow. What one can do now is to call into question the popular view that *meN-* is an active voice marker. In this paper, I would like to distance myself from the popular assumption and pursue the possibility that *meN-* is not an active voice marker. If *meN-* does not mark the active voice, then there remains only one active voice marker in Malay/Indonesian, namely $\emptyset_{ACT}$-. Since it is phonologically null, it becomes possible to

maintain the assumption of consistent voice (un-)marking. I call this hypothesis the Single Active Hypothesis.[1]

3. Evidence for the Single Active Hypothesis

Is there any data showing that *meN-* is not an active voice marker? If *meN-* is not an active voice marker, then what is it?

3.1 Aspectual effects of *meN-*

Soh and Nomoto (2009, 2010) point out two aspectual effects of *meN-*. First, situations described by sentences with *meN-* are always eventive. Stative verbs do not take the prefix *meN-*, e.g. *suka* 'to like' but **meny-(s)uka*. Soh and Nomoto (2009) show that apparent counterexamples such as stative verb suffixed by *-i* (e.g. *meny-(s)uka-i* 'to like') and mental state verbs (e.g. *meng-anggap* 'to regard') are in fact not stative but eventive by applying four stativity tests to sentences containing these verbs. The second aspectual effect of *meN-* is concerned with telicity: degree achievement sentences with *meN-* describe only atelic situations. In (6), *turun* 'to fall' is compatible with a *dalam* 'in' phrase whereas *men-(t)urun* 'to meN-fall' is not.

(6) a.　　Harga minyak turun selama/dalam tiga　hari.
　　　　　price oil　　fall for/in　　　　three day
　　　　　'The price of oil fell for/in three days.'
　　b.　　Harga minyak men-(t)urun selama/?dalam tiga hari.
　　　　　price oil　　　MEN-fall　for/in　　　　three day
　　　　　'The price of oil was falling for/?in three days.'

Soh and Nomoto (2010) 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 a genuine voice marker. Soh and Nomoto (2010) argue that *meN-* selects a situation with stages. (See Soh's paper for more on the aspectual effects of *meN-* and a general discussion of the relation of aspect to voice.)

3.2 Similar cases: *Kena* and *ter-*

Kartini and Nomoto (2010) claim that *kena* and *ter-*, which have been thought to mark the passive voice, are actually not passive markers. According to them, Malay employs a voice alternation that involves no overt voice morphology ("unvoiced voice alternation") in these constructions.[2]

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[1] 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 with one unmarked active voice like English and Japanese.

[2] Besides Malay, the phenomenon of unvoiced voice alternation is also found in Manggarai (Arka and Kosmas 2005) and (possibly) Riau Indonesian (Gil 2002). To speculate a bit, unvoiced voice alternation might be an areal feature of Southeast Asian languages. This speculation is based on the fact that at least in Malay, Thai, Vietnamese and Khmer, the morpheme occurring in the adversative passive construction and that conveying obligation 'have to' have the same form (Prasithrathsint 2004; Hiromi Ueda, p.c.). If the two turn out to be the same morpheme in respective languages, which claim is made for Malay by Kartini and Nomoto (2010), the same analysis in terms of unvoiced voice alternation as proposed for Malay by them should also apply to Thai, Vietnamese and Khmer.

(7) a.   Polis kena   tangkap pencuri itu.
                 police KENA catch   thief   that
                 'The police (have) got to arrest the thief.'
     b.   Pencuri itu kena   tangkap (oleh) polis.
                 thief   that KENA catch   by   police
                 'The thief got arrested by the police.'

(8) a.   Polis ter-tangkap lelaki itu.
                 polie TER-catch   man that
                 'The police arrested the man by mistake.'
     b.   Lelaki itu ter-tangkap (oleh) polis.
                 man   that TER-catch   by   police
                 'The man was mistakenly arrested by the police.'

A novelty of their analysis is that they regard the adversative passive *kena* (7a) and *kena* meaning 'have to' (7b) as a single morpheme that is independent of voice. This is because (i) they share a common semantic content, i.e. 'regardless of the subject/speaker's will' or 'pressed by external circumstances' and (ii) the verb following *kena* can be affixed by the (alleged) active and passive markers *meN-* and *di-* as in (9).

(9) a.   Polis kena   men-(t)angkap pencuri itu.
                 police KENA MEN-catch   thief   that
                 'The police (have) got to arrest the thief.'
     b.   Pencuri itu   kena di-tangkap (oleh) polis.
                 thief   that KENA DI-catch   by   police
                 'The thief got arrested by the police.'

They argue that *kena* is not a passive marker but a funny predicate on a par with *mahu* 'to want' and *cuba* 'to try', which give rise to funny control as illustrated by (10) (cf. Nomoto 2008, to appear).

(10)   Pencuri itu mahu/cuba di-tangkap polis.
               thief   that want/try DI-catch   police
        (i)   'The thief wants/tried to be caught by the police.'
        (ii)   'The police want/tried to catch the thief.'

Since *kena* is not a passive marker, they conclude that there is no overt voice marker in *kena* sentences like (7). They hypothesise null voice markers, though there may be other ways to deals with the phenomenon at issue. The voice alternation involved in *kena* sentences can be diagrammed as in (11).

(11)   a. DP_{ext} kena [$_{vP}$ Ø$_{ACT}$- [$_{VP}$ V DP_{int}]] (active)

        b. DP_{int} kena [$_{vP}$ Ø$_{PASS}$-2 [$_{VP}$ V] (oleh) DP_{ext}] (passive)

Kartini and Nomoto (2010) leave the issue of the identity of the null voice markers for future research. My current take on the issue is that Ø$_{ACT}$- in (11a) is the same morpheme as Ø$_{ACT}$- in the bare active, whereas Ø$_{PASS}$-2 is either the covert version of or very similar to *di-* and distinct from Ø$_{PASS}$- in the bare passive (cf. (5)). For example, a sentence containing Ø$_{PASS}$-2 does not require an overt agent DP like *di-* sentences.

The same argument can be made for *ter-* sentences. *Ter-* can co-occur with *meN-* and *di-* (12), though very rarely, hence the alternation in (8) is also analysed in terms of unvoiced voices (13).

(12)   a.   Pihak akhbar   telah men-ter-balik-kan   kenyataan itu.
                    side   newspaper PERF MEN-TER-reverse-CAUS statement that
                  'The newspaper reversed the statement.'

           b.   Kenyataan itu telah di-ter-balik-kan   oleh pihak akhbar.
                  statement that PERF DI-TER-reverse-CAUS by   side newspaer
                  'The statement was reversed by the newspaper.'

(13)   a.   DP$_{ext}$ [$_{vP}$ Ø$_{ACT}$- [$_{FP}$ ter- [$_{vP}$ V DP$_{int}$]]] (active)

           b.   DP$_{int}$ [$_{vP}$ Ø$_{PASS}$-2 [$_{FP}$ ter- [$_{vP}$ V]] (oleh) DP$_{ext}$] (passive)

Unlike *kena* sentences, *ter-* sentences are not a feature that is exclusive to Colloquial Malay. Therefore, it is concluded that unvoiced voices are a feature shared by both Formal and Colloquial Malay. Furthermore, unvoiced voices are the preferred choice of voice in these two constructions in both varieties of Malay. Although the use of bare actives in Formal Malay is often frowned upon when the morphological active equivalent is available, it is the preferred option where these two constructions are concerned.

4. Making sense of the optionality

So far, we have succeeded in making the active voice marking of Malay consistent, that is, it is always not marked overtly. However, it should not be missed that the problem concerning optionality has not been solved at all; it has simply been relocated to somewhere a little farther from the verb.

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. In Nomoto (2010), I argue that classifiers exist to disambiguate two possible interpretations of NPs, namely object and subkind readings. Like *meN-*, classifiers are optional in Malay. Numerals can combine with nouns either directly or with the intermediary of classifiers. However, there is a difference in interpretation between 'Num CL' (English type) and 'Num CL N' (Japanese type). While the former can refer to either subkinds of a kind (subkind reading) or instantiations of a kind (object reading), the latter can only refer to instantiations of a kind. (14) and (15) show that both 'Num N' and 'Num CL N' are used for an object reading (i.e. 'three copies of magazines') whereas only 'Num N' is felicitous for a subkind reading (i.e. 'three kinds of magazines').

(14)   Kami menjual {*tiga majalah*/ *tiga   buah majalah*} dan semua majalah   itu
           we   sell   three magazine three CL   magazine and all   magazine that
           majalah   Mastika.
           magazine Mastika
           'We have three magazines and all of them are *Mastika*.'

(15)   Kami menjual {*tiga majalah*/ #*tiga buah majalah*}, iaitu   majalah   Mastika,
         we   sell   three magazine three CL magazine   namely magazine Mastika
         Majalah PC dan Nona.
         magazine PC and Nona[3]
         'We have three (kinds of) magazines, namely *Mastika*, *Majalah PC* and *Nona*.'

My account for this contrast is as follows. Individuals consist of two basic sorts, viz. [object] and [kind], and each has its own domain. NPs start their lives in the [kind] domain. The sort/type-shifter, Ins(tantiate), shifts the domain from [kind] to [object]. Overt classifiers select [object] properties, signalling the application of Ins. Hence, 'Num CL N' is not ambiguous. When an overt classifier is absent, Ins may or may not apply, resulting in ambiguity between an object reading (interpreted in the [object] domain) and a subkind reading (interpreted in the [kind] domain).

Likewise, *meN-* disambiguates possible interpretations of vPs (or VoicePs), namely [+stage] and [−stage] interpretations. In the case of degree achievement verbs such as *turun* 'to fall', the [+stage] interpretation arises by application of the semantic operation of S(ingular)-summing (Rothstein 2008a, b). As can be seen in (6a) with *turun*, both [+stage] (atelic) and [−stage] (telic) interpretations are available without *meN-*. *MeN-* selects [+stage] events as in (6b), signalling the application of S-summing.

The key idea is that an overt linguistic material does not add a meaning but subtracts one. The subtraction is not necessary if it is fine to keep the interpretation vague, which is often the case in colloquial speech. Also, the more obvious the relevant interpretation is from the nature of other linguistic materials or non-linguistic contexts, the less likely/necessary for the relevant overt linguistic material to occur. This is why classifiers and *meN-* are optional in Malay. It also explains why the two elements are found more frequently in Formal Malay than in Colloquial Malay, as the former requires more clarity.[4] Note that both classifiers and *meN-* select the interpretation obtained through the relevant semantic operation. The parallelism between classifiers and *meN-* can be summarised as in (16). 'OP' in the table represents a covert semantic operation, which is Ins for NPs and S-summing for vPs.

(16)

α		NP	vP
interpretation 1: $[\![\alpha]\!]$		[kind]	[−stage]
interpretation 2: $OP([\![\alpha]\!])$		[object]	[+stage]
$\beta\alpha$		CL NP	meN- vP
interpretation 1: $[\![\beta]\!]([\![\alpha]\!]) = ??$		—	—
interpretation 2: $[\![\beta]\!](OP([\![\alpha]\!])) = OP([\![\alpha]\!])$		[object]	[+stage]

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[3] *Tiga buah majalah* is acceptable on an object reading, where we have a copy of each of the three magazines: *Mastika* 1, *Majalah PC* 1, *Nona* 1.

[4] Nishiyama (2003) accounts for the fact that *meN-* is optional in colloquial speech in Indonesian in terms of the absence of an abstract clitic position to be licensed. The relevant abstract clitic position is activated as a result of movement of the object. This abstract clitic position must be licensed either by *di-* or a cliticised pronoun. Since the object does not move in an active sentence, "there is no activated clitic position to be licensed" (111). Hence, prefixless sentences are possible in the active. Given my assumption about the consistency of voice (un-)marking (cf. Nishiyama regards *meN-* as a transitive marker perhaps following Chung (1976), which I think is not adequate.), I still have to wonder why we do not always use *meN-* or always do away with it.

5. Prospects for future research

In this short paper, I have suggested the possibility that *meN-* is not an active voice marker and argued that *meN-* is optional because its role is not adding a meaning but subtracting one. According to my previous research with Hooi Ling Soh, the relevant meaning is related to aspect, more specifically whether or not a situation has stages. *MeN-* selects situations with stages and excludes situations without stages. In short, *meN-* is a means of disambiguation and hence is not obligatory.

A question that arises naturally is: why does *meN-* not occur in passives if it is not related to voice?

(17)   *Buku itu sudah   men-di-baca-nya.
            book that already MEN-DI-read-3SG
            For: 'The book was already read by him/her.'

There are at least two possibilities. First, *meN-* should not be able to occur in passives if passives in general lack stages. This is a semantic account. In this connection, Chung (1976:61–62) states that morphological passives are "semantically stative" whereas bare passives are "semantically active." Since no supporting data for this statement is given in the paper, it is necessary to examine its validity with concrete data. The second possible answer is syntactic. The question essentially is: why does *meN-* exhibit the famous blocking effect of DP movement (Saddy 1991; Soh 1998; Cole and Hermon 1998)? The present study offers a new perspective in tackling this longstanding problem: The prefix is located not in v but somewhere higher than v, i.e. Spec,vP (cf. Fortin 2008) or a higher projection (e.g. AspP).

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