

Voice and Aspect: Some Notes from Malay

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1. Introduction

It is widely assumed that the verbal prefix *meN-* in Malay is an active voice marker (e.g., Chung 1976; Son and Cole 2004; Nomoto and Shoho 2007, but see Gil 2002). This analysis is attractive as it accounts for (i) the canonical argument realization pattern in *meN-* sentences; (ii) the absence of *meN-* in *di-*passives and object preposed sentences and (iii) (to a certain extent) the well-known observation that *meN-* blocks DP movement across it (Saddy 1991; Soh 1998; Cole and Hermon 1998). In recent work, it has been demonstrated that *meN-* has aspectual effects. In particular, it may not appear in stative sentences (Soh and Nomoto 2009; Tham 2010), and its appearance affects the telicity of degree achievement sentences (Soh and Nomoto 2010b). The aspectual effects, in turn, influence how arguments are realized (Soh and Nomoto 2010a). In Soh and Nomoto (2010b), we account for these effects by proposing that *meN-* requires the sentences it occurs in to describe situations with stages, in the sense of Landman (1992, 2008).

The new findings on the aspectual effects of *meN-* raise questions about the status of *meN-*, and the extent to which an analysis of *meN-* as an active voice marker can be maintained, given its aspectual properties. In this paper, I examine the connection between voice and aspect across languages and consider the extent to which an analysis of *meN-* as an active voice marker can explain its aspectual properties. I argue that while voice may interact with aspect, the particular patterns found with *meN-* are unlike that observed in other languages, making it difficult to maintain that *meN-* is an active voice marker or a marker of both active voice and aspect. I claim that *meN-* is an aspectual rather than an active voice marker (cf. Gil 2002). The only active voice marker in Malay is phonologically null. I present alternative accounts for properties associated with *meN-* that have been attributed to its active voice status. I argue that while many recent analyses of the blocking effects of *meN-* assume that *meN-* is an active voice marker, their particular accounts do not depend on that assumption. In addition, I claim that some recent phase based accounts for the blocking effects of *meN-* within the Minimalist Program are problematic as they are too focused on *meN-* and thus cannot be easily extended to account for the fact that the prefix *ber-*, like *meN-*, also exhibits the same restrictions (Soh 1998).

2. Background

2.1 The prefix *meN-* and active voice

The prefix *meN-* is commonly assumed to be an active voice marker. This analysis straightforwardly accounts for the canonical argument realization pattern in *meN-* sentences. As shown in (1a), the sentence with *meN-* has the agent realized in a subject position and the theme realized in an object position. This is in contrast with the sentence with the prefix *di-* in (1b), where the theme appears in a subject position and the agent is introduced by an *oleh-* phrase.

- (1) a. Ali mem-beli buku itu.
Ali MEN-buy book the
'Ali bought the book.'
- b. Buku itu di-beli oleh Ali.
book the DI-buy by Ali
'The book was bought by Ali.'

In addition, the analysis provides a natural explanation for the absence of *meN-* in *di-* passives and object preposed sentences, exemplified in (2) and (3) respectively. The absence of *meN-* in these sentences can be argued to be due to the inability of a sentence to bear both an active and a passive voice marker, assuming that object preposed sentences are passives (Chung 1976; Travis 2008, but see Arka and Manning 2008).

- (2) a. Buku itu di-beli oleh Ali.
book the DI-buy by Ali
- b. *Buku itu men-di-beli/di-mem-beli oleh Ali.
book the MEN-DI-buy/DI-MEN-buy by Ali
- (3) a. Buku itu telah Ali beli.¹
book the PERF Ali buy
'Ali has bought the book'
- b. *Buku itu telah Ali mem-beli.
book the PERF Ali MEN-buy

The analysis of *meN-* as a voice marker also has been suggested to explain the contrast in acceptability of *meN-* in *wh*-questions with a subject versus an object *wh*-phrase. Questions with a subject *wh*-phrase may occur with or without the prefix *meN-* as shown in (4), while questions with an object *wh*-phrase may not occur with the prefix *meN-* as shown in (5) (Saddy 1991; Soh 1998; Cole and Hermon 1998).²

- (4) a. Siapa-kah yang beli buku itu?
who-Q that buy book the
'Who bought the book?'
- b. Siapa-kah yang membeli buku itu?
who-Q that MEN-buy book the
'Who bought the book?'
- (5) a. Apa-kah yang Ali beli?
what-Q that Ali buy
'What did Ali buy?'

¹ The following abbreviations are used in this paper: PERF: perfective aspect; Q: question particle; ACT: active voice marker; CL: classifier; 1/2/3: 1st/2nd/3rd person; SG: singular.

² See Hassal (2005) for cases in relative clauses in Indonesian (and Malay) where this restriction may not fully apply, and the formal properties associated with such cases. Under standard analyses, the pattern found in *wh*-questions should parallel the one found in relative clauses. See Nomoto (in preparation) for why the examples cited there are not counterexamples to the ban on DP movement across *meN-*.

- b. *Apa-kah yang Ali mem-beli?
what-Q that Ali MEN-buy

Within the syntactic framework of Government Binding Theory/Minimalist Program, wh-questions are standardly analyzed as involving movement of the wh-phrase to a sentence initial position, namely SPEC-C. Thus, as shown in (6), the derivation of (4b) involves movement of the wh-phrase subject *siapa* to SPEC-C, while the derivation of (5b) involves movement of the wh-phrase object *apa* to SPEC-C.

- (6) a. [CP Siapa-kah yang [TP <siapa> mem-beli buku itu]]³
b. *[CP Apa-kah yang [TP Ali mem-beli <apa>]]

The contrast in acceptability between (4b) and (5b) can be described as *meN-* blocking DP movement across it (Saddy 1991; Soh 1998). The movement path crosses *meN-* when the wh-phrase originates in an object position, but does not do so when it originates in a subject position. This descriptive generalization is supported by more complex data involving wh-questions with an embedded clause. When the wh-phrase originates in an embedded clause, no subject-object asymmetry is found. Neither a subject nor an object wh-phrase in an embedded clause can be questioned (extracted) when the matrix verb bears the prefix *meN-* (Saddy 1991; Soh 1998).

- (7) a. *Siapa-kah yang Ali meng-anggap meny-[s]uka-i Karim?⁴
who-Q that Ali MEN-believe MEN-like-I Karim
'Who does Ali believe likes Karim?'
b. *[CP Siapa-kah yang [TP Ali meng-anggap [CP <siapa> meny-[s]uka-i Karim]]]
- (8) a. *Siapa-kah yang Ali meng-anggap Minah suka?
who-Q that Ali MEN-believe Minah like
'Who does Ali believe Minah likes?'
b. *[CP Siapa-kah yang [TP Ali meng-anggap [CP Minah suka <siapa>]]]

This is expected since the movement path of the wh-phrase from either the subject or the object position of the embedded clause to the matrix SPEC-C crosses the prefix *meN-* in the matrix clause.

While there are reasons to assume that *meN-* is an active voice marker, it has been demonstrated recently that *meN-* has aspectual effects. I present the aspectual effects of *meN-* in the next section.

2.2. The prefix *meN-* and aspect

One aspectual effect associated with *meN-* is a restriction in the type of sentences that *meN-* may appear in. Specifically, *meN-* may not appear in stative sentences as in (9) (Soh and Nomoto 2009; Tham 2010).

³ The pre-movement position is indicated with < >, and the material inside < > is a lower copy of the moved element and is not pronounced.

⁴ The segment inside [] represents the initial segment of the base/stem that is deleted with the prefixation of *meN-*.

- (9) a. Mereka suka masakan Jepun.
 3PL like cuisine Japan
 ‘They like Japanese cuisine.’
- b. *Mereka meny-[s]uka masakan Jepun.
 3PL MEN-like cuisine Japan

The appearance of *meN-* also affects the telicity of the sentence when the sentence describes a degree achievement (Soh and Nomoto 2010b). As (10) shows, degree achievement sentences may appear with a *selama* phrase or a *dalam* phrase, indicating that they may describe a telic or an atelic situation.

- (10) a. Harga minyak turun selama tiga hari.
 price oil fall for three day
 ‘The oil price fell for three days.’
- b. Harga minyak turun dalam tiga hari.
 price oil fall in three day
 ‘The oil price fell in three days.’

However, with *meN-*, these sentences can only describe atelic situations, but not telic ones.

- (11) a. Harga minyak men-[t]urun selama tiga hari.
 price oil MEN-fall for three day
 ‘The oil price was falling for three days.’
- b. *Harga minyak men-[t]urun dalam tiga hari. (cf. (10b))
 price oil MEN-fall in three day

Unlike degree achievement sentences, the presence of *meN-* in non-degree achievement sentences does not restrict their descriptions to atelic situations. Such sentences may also describe telic situations, as evidenced by their compatibility with a *dalam* phrase.

- (12) a. Dia tanam tiga batang pokok dalam masa satu jam.
 3SG plant three CL tree in time one hour
 ‘S/he planted three trees in an hour.’
- b. Dia men-[t]anam tiga batang pokok dalam masa satu jam.
 3SG MEN-plant three CL tree in time one hour
 ‘S/he planted three trees in an hour.’

In Soh and Nomoto (2010b), we argue that *meN-* requires that the sentences it occurs in have stage properties (in the sense of Landman 1992, 2008), and show that with degree achievements, *meN-*’s aspectual effect translates into a difference in telicity between sentences with *meN-* and sentences without.⁵ This aspectual effect in turn explains why *meN-* may not occur in stative sentences (Soh and Nomoto 2009). In addition, the aspectual effect is

⁵ See Gil (2002: 273) for early observations that *meN-* is preferred for ongoing as opposed to completed activities and for durative rather than punctual activities in Kuala Lumpur Malay.

shown to be responsible for why all intransitive sentences with *meN-* are unergative (see Soh and Nomoto 2010a for details).

While analyzing *meN-* as an active voice marker appears to account for a number of phenomena, new findings about the aspectual effects of *meN-* raise questions about such an analysis. In the next section, I examine the extent to which *meN-* can be considered an active voice marker despite the aspectual effects, by considering the connection between voice and aspect across languages and the extent to which an analysis of *meN-* as an active voice marker can explain its aspectual properties.

3. Voice, aspect and the prefix *meN-*

Voicing contrasts (active, passive and middle) have sometimes been linked to aspectual distinctions. These distinctions include notions such as telicity (Klaiman 1991), eventive versus stative (Klaiman 1991) and punctual versus non-punctual (Arce et al. 1994, Cooreman 1994). Although such associations have been made, they remain a tendency and the particular associations do not explain the facts found in Malay. For example, Fula, a language of the West Atlantic group of Niger-Congo, makes a distinction between active, middle and passive voice (Arnott 1956: 131 cited in Klaiman 1991: 47). When there are contrasting pairs between active voice and middle voice, middle voice tends to be associated with stative and atelic situations, in contrast to active voice which tends to be associated with eventive and telic situations (Klaiman 1991: 59-61). The particular aspectual effects of *meN-* do not pattern like the reported associations. While *meN-* does not occur in stative sentences, it may occur in telic or atelic sentences (see (9a) and (10b)). When *meN-* occurs in degree achievement sentences, the sentences may only have an atelic interpretation, but not a telic one (see (9)). There is no obvious way in which the aspectual effects of *meN-* can be captured by its status as an active voice. Although the situation does not preclude treating *meN-* as a marker of both active voice and aspect, the analysis is undesirable as the aspectual properties observed with *meN-* are not ones typically associated with active voice.

4. Explaining properties of *meN-* without voice

In this section, I show that properties associated with *meN-* that have been attributed to its active voice status may receive alternative explanations that do not rely on *meN-* being an active voice marker. In section 4.1, I present an account for why *meN-* sentences exhibit canonical argument realization pattern. In section 4.2, I argue that the reason why *meN-* may not appear in *di*-passives and object preposed sentences is due to the blocking effects of *meN-* and is unrelated to voice. In section 4.3, I argue that while many analyses of *meN-*'s blocking effects assume that *meN-* is an active voice marker, the particular accounts for the blocking effects do not depend on that assumption.

4.1 The canonical argument realization pattern

The canonical argument realization pattern found in *meN-* sentences has been attributed to its status as an active voice marker. However, it should be noted that Malay also has a phonologically null active voice marker. The null active voice marker is found in stem sentences given in (13), and this null active voice marker is responsible for the canonical argument realization pattern of such sentences.

- (13) Ali Ø-beli buku itu.
 Ali ACT-buy book the
 'Ali bought the book.'

Given the independent existence of the null active voice marker in Malay, the canonical argument realization pattern found in *meN*- sentences can be attributed to the null active voice marker and does not need to be borne by *meN*-.

- (14) Ali \emptyset -mem-beli buku itu.
 Ali ACT-meN-buy book the
 ‘Ali bought the book.’

The prefix *meN*- can be analyzed as marking solely aspectual information, specifically the presence of stage properties in the situation described by the sentence (Soh and Nomoto 2010b). The proposed analysis implies that the phonologically null active voice marker is the only option available in Malay to indicate active voice.

4.2 The absence of *meN*- in *di*-passives and object preposed sentences

The absence of *meN*- in *di*-passives and object preposed sentences also may receive an alternative explanation that does not necessitate treating it as an active voice marker. Under standard GB/Minimalist analyses of these sentences, the object DP undergoes movement from an object position to a subject position as shown below.⁶

- (15) a. [TP Buku itu [vP di-beli <buku itu> oleh Ali]]
 book the DI-buy book the by Ali
- b. [TP Buku itu telah [v*P Ali beli <buku itu>]]
 book the PERF Ali buy book the

The reason why *meN*- may not appear in *di*-passives and object preposed sentences is because the formation of *di*-passives and object preposed sentences involves such movement, and this movement of the object DP crosses *meN*-, as shown in (16).

- (16) a. *[TP Buku itu [vP men-di-beli <buku itu> oleh Ali]]
 book the MEN-DI-buy book the by Ali
- *[TP Buku itu [vP di-mem-beli <buku itu> oleh Ali]]
 book the DI-MEN-buy book the by Ali
- b. *[TP Buku itu telah [v*P Ali mem-beli <buku itu>]]
 book the PERF Ali MEN-buy book the

While the movement operation here does not involve a *wh*-phrase as in the cases discussed in section 2.1 and section 4.3 below, it has been demonstrated that movement of a non-*wh* object noun phrase to a subject position exhibits the same restriction as movement of a *wh*-phrase to SPEC-C (Cole and Hermon 1998; Nomoto 2008, forthcoming). Neither can cross the prefix *meN*-. Given this, it is not necessary to assume that *meN*- is an active voice marker to explain its absence in *di*-passives and object preposed sentences.

⁶ I assume following Marantz (1997) and Chomsky (2001, 2004) that there are different flavors of *v*. *v** is the functional head associated with full argument structure, transitive and experiencer constructions, unlike *v*. Thus *v**P has an external argument, while *v*P does not.

4.3 The blocking effects of *meN*-

Recent analyses have explored the blocking effects of *meN*- within a version of the Minimalist Program that assumes phases/Multiple Spell-out (e.g., Aldridge 2007, Cole, Hermon and Yanti 2008, Sato, to appear).⁷ These analyses assume that *meN*- is an active voice marker, but they differ in the specifics of their accounts. For example, Aldridge (2007) proposes that *meN*- is an active voice marker occupying *v* that lacks an EPP feature.

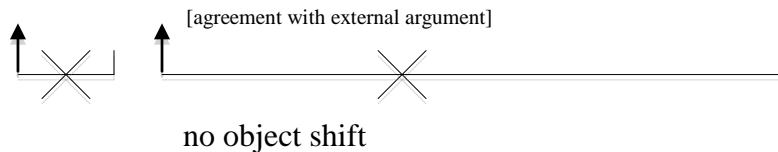
(17) [vP [v [no EPP feature] *meN*-] [VP [DP object]]]



The lack of the EPP feature prevents an object from moving to the edge of the vP phase. Such a movement is required for extraction out of VP in the phase-based approach.

Cole, Hermon and Yanti (2008) treat the obligatory absence of *meN*- in the presence of movement across it as an agreement phenomenon. The presence of *meN*- marks lack of object shift (and thereby agreement with the external argument), while the presence of a zero prefix marks the presence of object shift. Since only shifted objects (which are in the phase edge) are allowed to be further extracted, sentences with *meN*-verbs allow only the subject argument to be extracted.

(18) [VoiceP [Voice *meN*-] [vP [VP [DP object]]]]



Sato (to appear) treats the obligatory absence of *meN*- in the presence of movement across it in terms of the blocking of vocabulary insertion in the post-syntactic morphological component within the framework of Distributed Morphology. Within his analysis, a DP moves to the edge of *v**P (assuming a distinction between vP and *v**P) to delete the uninterpretable D-feature of the phase head.

(19) [v*P [v* [+D-]] [VP [DP object]]]



This deletion blocks the active voice prefix from being inserted under *v** in the post-syntactic morphological component. Instead, its null counterpart is inserted as the elsewhere vocabulary item.

(20) Vocabulary insertion

- i. *meN*- ↔ [v ____ [+D]] (specific case)
- ii. \emptyset_{meN} - ↔ [v ____ [...]] (elsewhere case)

⁷ Although Aldridge (2007) and Sato's (to appear) analyses are not based on Malay but are on Indonesian and related languages, their analyses should be seen as extendable to Malay given that Malay does not differ in the relevant respects from Indonesian.

While these analyses assume that *meN-* is an active voice marker, the particular accounts for the blocking effect of *meN-* do not appear to depend on its status as an active voice marker. For example, there is no necessary tie between being an active voice marker and the lack of an EPP feature in Aldridge (2007). Only the feature bundle inserted into *v* and spelled out as *meN-* does not carry an EPP feature. The feature bundle inserted into *v* that is found in stem sentences (also active) can bear an EPP feature (Aldridge 2007: 1456). In fact, the fact that these analyses share the assumption that the prefix *meN-* is an active voice marker, and yet differ in their actual accounts suggests that the blocking effects do not necessarily follow from *meN-*'s status as an active voice marker in these analyses. Thus there is no strong evidence for *meN-* being an active voice marker on the basis of its blocking effects.

In this section, I have shown that properties associated with *meN-* that have been attributed to its active voice status are either unrelated to that status or can be given alternative accounts that do not involve introducing new constraints or elements to the grammar. Thus, there is no strong reason for assuming that *meN-* is an active voice marker. Given that an analysis of *meN-* as an active voice marker cannot account for *meN-*'s aspectual effects (section 3), while an analysis of *meN-* as an aspectual marker can do so directly, the latter analysis is to be preferred. In the next section, I point out a fact that in my opinion should be, but has not been taken into consideration in most recent accounts of *meN-*'s blocking effects.

5. The blocking effects: Beyond the prefix *meN-*

Many accounts for the blocking effects of *meN-* have focused exclusively on the behavior of *meN-*. In Soh (1998), it is pointed out that other prefixes also may have the same blocking effects as *meN-*. In particular, the prefix *ber-* patterns like *meN-* in blocking movement across it. The same subject-object asymmetry is found in *ber-* in simple clauses. A question with a subject wh-phrase may appear with or without the prefix *ber-*, while a question with an object wh-phrase may not appear with *ber-* as shown in (21).⁸

- (21) a. Dia (ber-)main permainan komputer sampai larut malam.
3SG BER-play game computer till midnight
'He played computer games till midnight.'
- b. Siapa-kah yang (ber-)main permainan komputer sampai larut malam?
who-Q that BER-play game computer till midnight
'Who played computer games till midnight?'
- c. *Apa-kah yang dia ber-main sampai larut malam?
what-Q that he BER-play till midnight
- d. Apa-kah yang dia main sampai larut malam?
what-Q that he play till midnight
'What did he play till midnight?'

As (22) shows, the prefix *ber-* may not appear on the matrix verb when the wh-phrase originates in an embedded clause.

⁸ The semantic contribution of *ber-* in the examples in (21) and (22) is unclear. However, *ber-* has been associated with a reflexive, reciprocal and a result state reading when attached to other verbs (Nik Safiah et.al 1989).

- (22) a. Mereka (ber-)harap stok yang baru akan di-terima.
 they BER-hope stock that new will DI-accept
 ‘They hope that the new stock will be accepted.’
- b. Apa-kah yang mereka harap akan di-terima?
 what-Q that they hope will DI-accept
 ‘What do they hope will be accepted?’
- c. *Apa-kah yang mereka berharap akan di-terima?
 what-Q that they BER-hope will DI-accept (Soh 1998)

The fact that the blocking effect found with *meN-* is a more general one also shared by *ber-* raises questions about current analyses of the blocking effect of *meN-* that treat the obligatory absence of *meN-* in the presence of movement across it as either an agreement phenomenon (Cole, Hermon and Yanti 2008) or in terms of the blocking of vocabulary insertion in the post-syntactic morphological component (Sato, to appear). This is because these analyses are too *meN-* specific, and cannot be easily extended to account for the fact that the prefix *ber-*, like *meN-*, also exhibits the same restrictions.

6. Conclusion

I have shown that while voice may interact with aspect, the particular patterns found with *meN-* are unlike that observed in other languages. This makes it difficult to maintain that *meN-* is an active voice marker or a marker of both active voice and aspect. I claim that *meN-* is an aspectual marker and that the only active voice marker in Malay is phonologically null. I have presented alternative accounts for properties associated with *meN-* that have been attributed to its active voice status. I have noted that while many recent analyses of the blocking effects of *meN-* assume that *meN-* is an active voice marker, their accounts do not depend on that assumption. In addition, I have argued that many recent phase based accounts of the blocking effects of *meN-* are too focused on *meN-*, making it difficult to extend them to account for the same pattern of blocking effect found with the prefix *ber-*.

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