Sundic-Type Voice Systems

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Austronesian languages are renowned for their highly developed voice systems, but also for a considerable amount of internal diversity with respect to these systems. Within Austronesian, one important type of voice system, sometimes referred to as "Indonesian-type" (e.g. Arka and Ross 2005:7), involves a basic opposition between two voices, active and passive, distinguished by verbal prefixes, with the additional proviso that — unlike typical active/passive oppositions elsewhere — active and passive clauses exhibit similar syntactic stucture, that is to say, the passive voice does not involve the demotion of a core argument to oblique position.

Of course, many of the languages of Indonesia do not exhibit the Indonesian-type voice system. In northern Sulawesi, some languages have a voice system closer to the Philippine type; in Nusa Tenggara and elsewhere, many languages have a periphrastic passive resembling the standard European type; while in West Papua, some of the Austronesian languages are entirely lacking in an active/passive distinction. Still, the general assumption is that in the western part of the archipelago, at least, the Indonesian-type voice system, as exemplified (perhaps not by chance) with Standard Indonesian, is the norm.

However, recent work on a number of western Indonesian languages has called this assumption into question. Gil (2002) argues that Riau Indonesian and other colloquial varieties of Malay/Indonesian lack an active/passive distinction, as the term is commonly understood, while Gil (2008) shows that Minangkabau and Sundanese also diverge significantly from the usual Indonesian-type clause structure. Similar conclusions are also reached by Crouch (2009) for Minangkabau and by Conners (2008) for Tenggerese and other colloquial varieties of Javanese. Such work would seem to point towards the existence of yet another kind of Austronesian voice system, namely *Sundic-type*, characterized by isolating word structure, verbal prefixes with semantic rather than syntactic functions, and little or no justification for such grammatical distinctions as active-passive, subject-object, and core-oblique.

This paper presents overviews of the voice systems of two langauges belonging to the proposed Sundic type. The first, Riau Indonesian, instantiates the Sundic type in perhaps its purest the form. The second, Mentawai, is endowed with much richer morphological structure, however, in spite of its obvious cognacy with similar voice morphology in other Austronesian languages, the function of such morphology is also largely semantic rather than grammatical; thus, Mentawai also provides an example of a Sundic-type voice system.

In conclusion, this paper offers some speculations regarding the diachrony of Sundic-voice systems. It is proposed that Sundic-voice systems are the result of the original Austronesian intrusion into an ancient sprachbund of isolating languages extending from Mainland Southeast Asia throughout the archipelago and into Western New Guinea, and subsequent language contact involving radical restructuring and loss of the original Austronesian voice system. As for the so-called Indonesian-type voice system, it is suggested that, rather than descending directly from the original Austronesian system, it represents a secondary grammaticalization of the voice system referred to here as Sunda type.

References

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