

Conservative But Not Frozen: Sigulai and the Diverging Austronesian Voice Systems of the Barrier Islands Languages

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Abstract

This paper, based on fresh fieldwork data, examines *Sigulai* (ISO 639, *skh*; ~20,000 speakers; Simeulue Island, Aceh, Indonesia, Austronesian (AN), Sumatran, the Central Barrier Islands branch (Billings and McDonnell 2024)). *Sigulai* preserves typologically rare and theoretically significant configurations of conservative AN voice and ergativity, while also exhibiting innovative developments in its pronominal indexing system. Unlike its sister languages which have undergone significant grammatical drift, *Sigulai* maintains a robust ergative system and voice symmetry in matrix and embedded clauses. It also shows innovation through an inflected auxiliary (AUX) system and an emerging nominative (NOM) pattern, offering valuable insights into the interplay between morphosyntactic conservatism and change in AN languages.

In *Sigulai* (see Table 1), bound pronominal morphology follows a canonical ergative (ERG)-absolutive (ABS) pattern, marking A arguments with ERG prefixes (e.g. *ta-*, ex. (1a) and S/P arguments with ABS clitics (e.g. *=ami*, ex. (1b)). The transitive structure (1a) aligns with the Undergoer Voice (UV) construction seen in conservative Indonesian-type AN languages.

Sigulai retains Actor Voice (AV) with the *maN-* prefix (cognate of Indonesian *meN-*), yielding syntactically transitive clauses with a quasi-antipassive property. That is, AV verbs may surface with A in ABS clitics (e.g. *=du* in (2a)) while P is a bare core NP or an ACC-form pronoun (e.g., *etu* in (2b)). In a true antipassive, by contrast, the P argument would be syntactically oblique.

The argument alternation patterns (examples (1a), (2a-b)) suggest that *Sigulai* maintains a symmetrical voice system, though not as elaborate as that of its more distant Philippine-type relatives. This system enables both A and P to serve as syntactic pivot (PIV), in matrix and dependent clauses—a pattern that has been notably seriously eroded or totally lost in Enggano, Mentawai and Nias (Hemmings and Dalrymple to appear; Arka 2024). Structures such as control in *Sigulai* (examples (3)) and relativisation (examples (4)) further support this voice symmetry.

Yet *Sigulai* is not frozen in time. It shows structural innovation via a preverbal TAM-inflected AUX, where S/P ABS clitics are hosted, generating V(erb)-medial structures (AUX=[S/P]_{SUBJ/PIV} – [(A-)V] – [P]_{OBJ}). This diverges from the V-initial pattern typical of conservative Philippine-type languages, still observable in other Barrier Islands languages; e.g., Nias (Brown 2001:537) and Enggano (Edwards 2015; Hemmings to appear). The AUX-driven V-medial structure in *Sigulai* is increasingly dominant and is correlated with a gradual shift toward NOM alignment, especially in the use of SUBJ free pronouns, marked NOM with *i-* (cf., Table 1).

The interaction between voice morphology, argument indexing, and AUX-based clause structure with V-medial tendency in *Sigulai* reveals deep connections between information structure, inflection, and syntactic alignment. *Sigulai* stands out for the coexistence of AN ergative conservatism and clause-structural innovation, providing a compelling case for exploring how TAM and person-marking systems shape grammatical architecture over time.

Theoretically, these findings engage with long-standing questions about the locus of inflection (Nichols and Bickel 2013), the organization of morphosyntactic features (Siewierska 2004), and the interface between TAM, agreement, and argument structure—questions best addressed within feature-bundling and modular frameworks such as Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG) (Börjars, Nordlinger, and Sadler 2019; Arka, Asudeh, and Holloway-King 2021, among others). In the full paper, we present an analysis that motivates a portable feature architecture, in which inflectional categories cluster across domains, effectively modelled within LFG. Our work contributes to typological debates on the (near-)universality of constructs such as the syntactic PIV/subject (cf., Evans and Levinson 2009), and related recurrent patterns like grammatical alignment and voice. This underscores the value of documenting minority languages for refining theories of alignment, agreement, and argument realisation.

- 1 a. *Mo=ami ta-ila mənəfi.* b. *Mənəfi mo=ami khumundung*
 ST-2PL.ABS 1PL.Exc.ERG-see yesterday yesterday PST=2PL.ABS run
 ‘We saw you(PL) yesterday’ ‘Yesterday you(PL) ran’

	Free		Bound		
	NOM.	ACC.	ERG	ABS	POSS
1sg.	(i-)etu	etu	u-	=du	-gu
2sg.	(i-)egə	egə	mu-	=gə	-mo
3sg.	(i-)fəi	fəi	i-	=di/=ya	-ni
1PL.Incl.	(i-)fəita	fəita	ta-	=ita	-da
1PL.Excl.	(i-)fəaga	fəaga	məi-	=ga	-ma
2PL.	(i-)fəami	fəami	mi-	=ami	-mi
3PL.	(i-)fəila	fəila	la-	=ila	-la

Table 1. Personal Pronouns in Sikule

- 2.a *mo=du ma-longo [Risna u-di bəlagu]_{COMP}*
 PST=1SG.ABS AV-hear Risna_i PRS-3SG.ABS_i sing
 ‘I heard Risna singing’
- b. *Ifəi yuw mang-əntuk etu*
 3SG.NOM REL. PIV AV-hit 1SG.ACC
 ‘He who hit me’, or ‘the one who hit me is him’
- 3.a *letu meifakha-du i-parekso dokter imea nen*
 1SG.NOM want-1SG.ABS PIV [3SG.ERG]_i-check [doctor person that]_i
 ‘I want to be checked up by the doctor’
- b. *Dokter imea nen meifakha-di ma-marekso etu*
 doctor Person Dem.Dist want-3SG.ABS PIV AV-check up 1SG.ACC
 ‘The doctor wants to check me up’
- 4a. *Ifəi yuw mang-əntuk etu*
 3SG.NOM REL. PIV AV-hit 1SG.ACC
 ‘He who hit me’, or ‘the one who hit me is him’
- b. *letu yuw mo i-əntuk*
 1SG.NOM REL. PIV PST 3SG.ERG-hit
 ‘I who he hit’, or ‘The one he already hit is me’

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