

Keeping U in Focus: A Barrier Islands Micro-Typology of Patient-Salient Constructions

Oral presentation

Austronesian languages are famous for their grammatical voice systems which have long been the object of linguistic inquiry. Broadly, these systems can be divided into two types: Philippine-type and Indonesian-type (see Chen and McDonnell 2019 for details). Indonesian-type languages, with which this study is firstly concerned, generally display two patient-salient constructions¹, an undergoer voice and a passive which can have many formal similarities that make them hard to disambiguate. Further complicating the issue, voice systems (and passives) tend toward erosion in parts of the Austronesian family, leading to situations like in Manggarai where passive like constructions are formed without any passive morphology and instead are constructed analytically (Arka and Kosmas 2005).

In this study, we present a micro-typology of patient-salient constructions in Barrier Islands languages (Sumatran) based on existing resources and new fieldwork data collected for Devayan, Sipora Mentawai and Sigulai. These languages display vastly different patient-salient constructions, despite their close genetic affiliation, and so provide an ideal laboratory to study the broader question we are interested in: why particular languages retain an undergoer voice/passive and what communicative work it uniquely performs relative to, for example, topic-fronting, pronominal indexing, serial verbs, and impersonals (Arka 2006; Himmelmann 1996). We also consider other Sumatran, Austronesian and non-Austronesian languages of Indonesia as points of comparison.

As a way to explore the often slippery difference between undergoer voice and passive, we combine Canonical Typology (Corbett 2005; Bond 2019) and Prototype Theory (Rosch and Mervis 1975; Geeraerts 1989) to allow for the accurate measurement of these constructions against established reference points. In the case of Canonical Typology, we measure against a canonical passive² and for Prototype Theory, we measure against the areal prototype.

We coded languages for seven properties which have been cross-linguistically established to belong to a canonical/prototypical passive (Shibatani 1985; Siewierska 2024) and for each language we report: (i) a canonicity score (average and composite) and (ii) a prototype distance score (see Table 1). These properties include: 1. dedicated undergoer voice/passive morphology (VM), 2. agent flagged as oblique (AO), 3. agent appearing in peripheral position (AP); 4. agent demoted/omissible (A-dem), 5. undergoer acting as subject (U-subj), 6. resultive/stative profile (RESULT), 7. eventive profile (inverted in canonicity) (EVENT).

We identify three broad types of patient-salient constructions in Barrier Islands languages:

1. true passive systems (Sigulai, Nias and Devayan *ni-*, and Enggano *kir-* *V*) where dedicated passive morphology licenses undergoer as subject, agent is optional or expressed in a non-core position (1).
2. “undergoer” systems (Sigulai person marking (PM) and Enggano *di-* *V*) with dedicated undergoer voice morphology, no/limited omissibility of agent and frequently eventive profile (2).
3. indexing-only systems with passive-like readings (Sipora Mentawai), where undergoer topicality is achieved via information structure strategies rather than grammatical voice (3).

Devayan person marking does not fit neatly into any of these types as it appears to be in state of change moving from person marking in undergoer voice as seen in Sigulai to an indexing only system as seen in Sipora Mentawai.

Overall, we find that where undergoer subject selection is communicatively valuable and agent demotion is available, undergoer voice and passives persist, but in the case of Sipora Mentawai, where indexing disambiguates roles and information structure strategies are strong, these constructions erode into indexing-only systems, showing how information structure pressures and available coding resources conspire to keep—or not keep—U in focus.

¹ We use the term “patient-salient” to refer to constructions where the semantic patient is the grammatically privileged argument (generally called “subject” in the study of Indonesian-type languages). We do extend our research further than this though to also consider constructions where the patient is not grammatically privileged but has high discourse topicality leading to passive-like readings (e.g., Sipora Mentawai).

² We chose to measure against a canonical passive rather than a canonical undergoer voice as a canonical undergoer voice is not well established cross-linguistically. It is likely that these constructions exist in a gradient between a canonical passive and a canonical undergoer voice, and a broader goal of ours is to define what a canonical undergoer voice is to be able to fully explore this feature space.

Table 1 Patient-salient constructions in Barrier Islands languages and beyond

Language / Construction	VM	AO	AP	A-dem	U-subj	Result	Event	Avg CT (0–2)	Composite (0–14)	Prototype distance	Source
Barrier Islands											
Sigulai (<i>ni-</i>)	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	1.43	10	1	fieldwork
Sigulai (PM)	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	1.43	10	1	
Nias (<i>ni-</i>)	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	1.71	12	0	Brown 2001
Devayan (<i>ni-</i>)	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	1.71	12	0	fieldwork
Devayan (PM)	2	0	0	0	1	1	2	0.57	4	8	
Enggano (<i>di- V</i>)	2	0	2	1	2	1	2	1.14	8	4	Hemmings to appear
Enggano (<i>kir- V</i>)	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1.71	12	2	
Sipora Mentawai	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	0.42	3	8	fieldwork
Other Sumatran											
Mandailing (<i>i-</i>)	2	1	?	2	2	?1	2	?1.33	?8	?2	fieldwork
Other Austronesian											
Manggarai	0	2	2	2	2	1	2	1.29	9	5	Arka and Kosmas 2005
Kodhi	0	0	2	0	0	?	1	?0.42	?3	?7	fieldwork
Other non-Austronesian											
Kimaghima	0	0	2	1	1	?2	?	?1	?6	?6	fieldwork

* Per-axis scoring (0–2): 0 absent; 1 mixed/limited; 2 robust/obligatory. Canonicity avg (0–2) = (VM+AO+AP+A-dem+U-subj+Result+(2–Event))/7. Composite (0–14) = same sum without averaging. Prototype distance: we take the Nias and Devayan *ni-* constructions to be the areal prototype as they are the only identically scoring constructions across Barrier Islands languages. We then add up the difference in the scores between the other constructions and this prototype (i.e., the higher the score the more different it is to the prototype and a score of 0 indicates it is identical to the prototype).

Devayan:

(1) an untuk ni-an melafek-lafek biaso-ne sering ami mang-adeen ede
 food for PASS-eat morning-RDP usual-ADVZ often 1PL.EXCL.NOM ACT-make DIST
 'We often made food to be eaten in the morning.'

Sigulai:

(2) manu nen mo-la-tagə ifəila
 chicken DIST PST-3PL.ERG-steal3PL.NOM
 'They stole the chicken.'

Sipora Mentawai:

(3) Yosep a-i-kukru jo'jo' nera
Yosep REAL-3SG.NOM-chase dog that
'Yosep chased the dog.' (preferred)
'Yosep was chased by the dog.' (requires discourse context)

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