At the Edge of Voice: Sigulai Passive *ni-*, Prominence, and the Core–Oblique Continuum

This paper, based on fresh fieldwork data, examines *ni-* constructions in Sigulai (ISO 639-3 skh; ~20,000 speakers; Central Barrier Islands, Simeulue Island, Aceh, Indonesia; Billings & McDonnell 2024) and uses them to engage three wider debates: (i) whether contrasts such as core (subject/object) vs oblique and passive vs non-passive are categorical or scalar; (ii) how prominence is distributed across grammatical modules and shaped by interacting constraints; and (iii) why detailed description of minority languages is crucial for testing typological generalisations and refining theory at the edges of systems.

Sigulai is predominantly left-headed with its clausal syntax shown in (1): auxiliary/TAM material (e.g. mo 'PST') occurs clause-initially and typically hosts bound ABS(olutive) pronouns (SUBJ/PIVOT). The distribution of this ABS SUBJ shows patterns with Austronesian Wackernagel-type (2P) pronominal systems in that it seeks the first available host in the predicate complex (lexical V vs AUX), a predicate-domain second-position effect best analysed as prominence-/constraint-driven placement rather than simple suffixation(Anderson 1993; Halpern 1995; Kaufman 2010).

Sigulai shows robust voice alternations, (e.g., AV (actor voice), UV (Undergoer voice), PASS(ive voice)) within a syntactically ergative profile (Akoli, Arka, and Li 2025). Only the UV-PASS alternation is exemplified in (2). In the UV construction (2a), the verb bears an ERG prefix (*i-*) and the transitive P(atient))/U(ndergoer) is SUBJ/PIVOT, and the A(ctor) remains a core argument. While non-SUBJ, A remains the most prominent core argument in the UV structure, possibly binding the P SUBJ, =*di*, giving rise to a reflexive reading in (2a). (Sigulai has no dedicated reflexive pronouns like English.) The *ni-* construction forms a further PASS alternation (2b): *ni-* marks an P-oriented clause in which A is syntactically demoted or omitted, yielding an intransitive-like profile, yet agents can still be realised postverbally as NPs or pronouns of varying person/number (3). This rules out an analysis of *ni-* as pronominal agreement in Sigulai; cf. the pronominal *ni-* in Devayan (Mullan 2025). Crucial evidence of A-demotion to oblique comes from A's inability in (2b) to bind the ABS SUB J=*di*: the binder must be a more prominent argument than the bindee.

Comparatively, reflexes of PAN/PMP *-in- are widely associated with perfective/past meanings and, in many subgroups, with undergoer orientation and passive/UV morphosyntax (cf., Blust & Trussel (2010[2020])). The debate includes a question of how *-in- reflexes are repurposed over time (infix vs prefix, TAM vs voice, derivation vs inflection) and how undergoer-oriented morphology coexists with pronominal agents. van den Berg (2004) proposes a Malayic pathway in which earlier *ni-* (linked to PAN/PMP*-in-) is continued as Malay di- and relates this to earlier patterns combining undergoer orientation with bound pronominal agent marking (i.e., *di-*V=pro), which is grammatically an UV in Indonesian (Arka and Manning 2008). van den Berg does not claim this also for Sigulai; hence, our contribution is to provide new and independent non-Malayic evidence from Sigulai for the debate of the broader evolutionary space of U-oriented expression in AN languages.

McDonnell & Truong (2024) mention Sigulai only briefly in their survey of non-Malayic Sumatran and Barrier Islands languages, noting that *-i*n-/*ni-* reflexes can function as passive/UV markers and suggesting limited productivity in Sigulai/Devayan. Our paper fills this gap with a fieldwork-based, construction-level analysis of contemporary Sigulai, showing that ni- is systematic and theoretically revealing.

Empirically, we establish that Sigulai has two homophonous *ni* morphemes, also recognised in Kähler's (1955) early description of Sikule: non-pronominal PASS *ni-* vs pronominal POSS *-ni*, with the latter not discussed in the paper, and that PASS *ni-* surfaces at the left edge of the verbal morphology. Typologically, Sigulai provides a clear case of passive gradience: agent demotion is real and measurable, but does not correlate with a single canonical oblique encoding (e.g. PP) or a uniform bundle of passive diagnostics. Using Arka's (2017) core-index diagnostics, we show that the actor in *ni-*clauses has a core index of 0.33, placing it in a semi-core/marginal-oblique zone rather than the prototypical oblique range.

Theoretically, we model *ni-* clauses as the outcome of interacting constraints across morphology, argument structure, and information structure/prominence within a modular architecture compatible with LFG (Bresnan et al. 2015; Dalrymple 2023) and prominence-based approaches (Latrouite 2011; Riesberg and Primus 2015). On this view, *ni-* does not always flip a categorical switch from active to passive; instead, it systematically shifts the prominence profile of arguments – affecting accessibility for diagnostics such as binding and pivot-like behaviour – while still allowing limited agent realisation. This yields intriguing active-passive ambiguity/competition in certain *ni-* environments (4) and offers a minority-language window on how gradient voice categories emerge from constraint interaction.

Supporting data points

1 (NP:TOP_i)   (AUX=ABS.CL_SUBJ_i)   {ERG|VOICE.PREF}VERB(=ABS.CL)   (NP*:OBJ) (PP:OBL*)
                      S/P   A   S/P   R>T   goal/ben, …

2 a. ifəi   dakhuk=di   yuw   **i-**pəisip   'UV.care<**A**:'3sg.ERG_i', **P**:'3SG.ABS'_i>'
       3SG   NEG=3SG.ABS   REL.   3SG.ERG-take care | |
       'He_i does not take care of himself_i/him_j'.   CORE   SUBJ/PIV

   b. ifəi   dakhuk=di   yuw   **ni-**pəisip   (bos-**ni)**   'PASS.care <**P**:'3SG.ABS (**A**:'3sg/his.boss') >'
       3SG   NEG=3SG.ABS   REL   PASS-take care   boss-3SG.POSS | |
       (i) 'He_i is not taken care (by someone_j/[his boss]_j/*himself_i)'   SUBJ/PIV   OBL
       (ii)* Himself_i was not taken care by [his boss]_i'

3   Biuk nen   mo=di   ni-ohe   (ietu/ifəaga/ ifəami/iegə/ ifəila/abanggu)
     knife DEF   PST=3SG PASS-grab   1SG/1PLExc/1PLInc/2SG/3PL/older.brother.1SGPOSS
     The knife was grabbed (by me/us (excl./incl)/you/them/my elder brother).

4   Ifeaga   alekni   mo-la   ni-ila   Joni   menefi
     1PL.INC   all   PST-PERF   (PASS)-see   Joni   yesterday
     (i) ''We all saw Joni yesterday.'   (where *ni-* is not part of a PASS construction)
     (ii) 'We were all seen by Joni yesterday.'   (where *ni-* is part of a PASS construction)

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