Causation with a middle twist:
Voice and causative-middle syncretism in Barrier Islands Austronesian and beyond

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Abstract

Proto-Austronesian reconstructions commonly distinguish causative **pa*- from middle/reciprocal **R*- (Kaufman 2009; 2018, among others, and the references therein), yet a number of Western Malayo-Polynesian languages in Indonesia display systematic overlap between causation and non-active "middle" functions. This abstract focuses on the subtype where "middle" is at least reciprocal (and often reflexive/affected-actor): the Actor remains in the argument structure but is also interpreted as affected, via role fusion or controlled overlap. Using fresh fieldwork-based material from Barrier Islands languages (Nias, Sipora Mentawai, Sigulai) together with comparative points from Mandailing-Angkola and Kodhi (Sumba), we offer an argument-structure-based analysis, with LFG-style linking terms, that is straightforwardly translatable into a Chomskyan Voice/VP architecture. We argue that causative-middle syncretism is not accidental but reflects a principled tight interface in (i) predicate composition of valency-changing heads that license role fusion and (ii) voice constraints that encode AV vs non-AV mapping.

Empirically, two patterns can be distinguished. In a transparent pattern, a single reflex of **pa(R)*- overtly marks both reciprocal middles and causatives. Nias is representative: the same prefix *fa*- marks reciprocal middle (1a) and participates in the causative system (*f-/fa-/fe-),* visible in *m-/f*- alternations on dynamic predicates (1b). Kodhi shows an even cleaner alternation, where *pa*- derives causatives from stative/intransitive bases and also derives reciprocal predicates from transitive bases, with a clear object suppression contrast (2). In a less transparent pattern, **pa*- material is historically packaged with actor-voice morphology and/or older **N* material, yielding surface AV exponents such as *maN-/meN*- whose **pa*-component is most visible in non-AV environments and in stacking contexts, as seen in Sipora Mentawai *pa*- 'RECIP.MID'/*pasi*- 'NAV.TR' in (3) (in contrast to *masi*- 'AV.TR' (not exemplified due to space); cf. Kaufman (2018) on layered causatives and **pa/R/N* interactions).

1 a. Nias: reciprocal middle *fa*-

Fa-bözi	ira
MID-hit	3PL.MUT

'They hit each other/one another.'

b. Nias: *m-/f*- (MID/CAUS) alternations (Brown 2001:233)

m-aoso 'get up, wake up'	f-aoso 'raise'
m-e'e 'cry'	f-e'e 'make cry'
m-e'e 'cry'	f-e'e 'make cry'

2 Kodhi: non-reciprocal vs reciprocal (object suppression) (Ganggho Ate, in progress)

a.

Atobhokoya	*a*	Komi
a=tobhoko=ya	a	Komi
3PL.NOM=meet=3SG.ACC	DEF.SG	Komi

'They met the Komi.' [KOD19-MH Maghu Rumba]

b.

Apatobhoko
a=pa-tobhoko
3PL.NOM=RECIP-meet

'They meet each other.'

3 a. Sipora Mentawai: reciprocal middle *pa*-

pa-lakkai	sia
RECIP-hug	3PL

'They hug each other.' (Arka 2024)

b. Sipora Mentawai: NAV transitiviser (Keith and Arka 2025)

Nera	sikkoinan	[si=pasi-matei-ake'	simanteu]
That	crocodile	REL=TR-dead-CAUS	male

'That's the crocodile that killed the man.'

The Barrier Islands data also underscore the importance of Voice. In Sigulai, reciprocal-middle marking is expressed by a distinct morpheme (*be-/fe-,* including complex forms), while causation is expressed by *pe*-, and *pe*- clearly stacks under AV vs non-AV (4). In Mandailing, middle verbalization appears as *mar-/par-/marsi*- (5), while AV is expressed by *maN*-, and the broader system exhibits the *m/p* alternations and layering that are expected if older **pa*- material has undergone phonological fusion and reanalysis. Across these systems, a robust generalization emerges: voice morphology (AV vs NAV) is "higher" than or "applied after" causativization, which helps explain (i) why Indonesian-type non-AV markers (*di-, ni*-) themselves do not become productive causativizers, even when causatives can appear in non-AV clauses, and (ii) MID-CAUS syncretism is retained when AN voice morphology has been completely lost as in Kodhi.

In our analysis, we propose that the syncretism targets a specific causative type, a "fused causative" head (CAUSE_fused) that licenses role fusion (or controlled overlap) between Actor/Initiator and Undergoer roles, informally represented in (6a). Where CAUSE_fused is realized by a **pa*-reflex, reciprocal and reflexive middles are derived without deleting the Actor: the same participant (index *i*) can act as initiator and affected participant, or a plural subject can be interpreted as mutual co-actors/co-undergoers, yielding a detransitivising effect, e.g., the observed object suppression in Kodhi (2b), and a reciprocal reading as in Nias (1). In contrast, disjoint causatives (CAUSE_disjoint) (6b), such as Indonesian -*kan*-type causation, enforce A≠U (a distinct causee/undergoer) and

therefore resist reciprocal-middle interpretations; this predicts the asymmetry that the Indonesian *-kan*-type causation *-kan* does not participate in causative–reciprocal middle syncretism.

4 Sigulai: causative *pe-* under Voice (AV vs NAV)

a. Udu ma-pe-eba / ma-pe-onoono naite nen.
1SG AV-CAUS-big AV-CAUS-small.REDUP fire that
'I enlarged / reduced the fire.'

b. Naite nen ni-pe eba / ni-pe ono-ono (si) Joni.
fire that PASS-CAUS big / PASS-CAUS small.REDUP (ART) Joni
'The fire was enlarged / reduced by Joni.'

5 Mandailing: AV 'teach' vs MID 'learn'

a. guru on mang-ajar danak i
teacher DEM.PROX AV-teach child DEM.DIST
'This teacher is teaching that kid Mandailing language.'

b. marsi-ajar bahasa mandeling danak i
mars*i*-teach language PN child DEM.DIST
'That kid is learning Mandailing language.'

6 a. "CAUSE_fused < ___ i, (__i/j), 'STEM.PRED <…, ___ , … > >
(A) (U) A/U

b. "CAUSE_ disjoint < ___ i, __j, 'STEM.PRED ' <…, ___ , … > >
(A) (U) A/U

In LFG-style linking terms, the contrast can be expressed as a constraint on argument-structure mapping: CAUSE_fused permits identity between A and U indices (or a structured set-valued relation for reciprocity), whereas CAUSE_disjoint prohibits it; Voice constraints then map the fused configuration to grammatical functions under AV vs non-AV. We propose general principles argument fusion in complex predicate formation: arguments of the matrix CAUSE and embedded STEM.PREDs of thematically similar types tend to fuse (Austin 2005 [1996]; Arka et al. 2009), and A=U co-identity (with/out reciprocal meaning) is also constrained by, among other things, arguments' sentiency/animacy and stem's lexical semantics. Thus, for stems such as Indonesian *susah* 'difficult, in trouble' that allow both sentient and non-sentient participants, we have the expected (opaque) CAUS-MID syncretism, with *per-*/*ber-* alternation: *per-susah* 'make X hard'/*ber-susah-susah, bersusah-payah.* This is not possible, however, for its near-synonym *sukar* 'difficult': *persukar/*bersukar(-sukar/payah).* In a minimalist translation, CAUSE_fused is a low v/valency head with an underspecified [±disjoint] parameter (or theta-identification option), while Voice is higher and independently encodes AV vs NAV. This layered architecture also captures why **pa-* can drift toward middle/reciprocal in some branches while still composing with voice.

Finally, the same family of exponents appears to have broader diachronic potential. Old Balinese lexicographic evidence suggests *pi(R)-* in passive-like meanings (e.g. *pi-rumah-in* 'be occupied', *pi-suruh-ang* 'be ordered by'), raising the possibility that a fuller paper should track a three-way arena CAUS–MID–PASS for **pa/*R* material across time. The AFLA talk will focus on the micro-typology of CAUS–(RECIP.)MID syncretism (transparent vs opaque), diagnostics from voice stacking and object suppression, and a minimal argument-structure account that connects syncretism to the (un)availability of role fusion under different causative heads.

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