

From Voice to Definiteness: Referential Restructuring in Western Austronesian

Abstract

Following Givón's (1971) classic aphorism that 'today's morphology is yesterday's syntax,' this paper examines the diachronic relationship between referential marking and the erosion of voice systems in Western Austronesian (WMP). We argue that the evolution of definite marking is not an isolated nominal development, but part of a broader restructuring of grammar triggered by the weakening of the rich voice morphology inherited from Proto-Austronesian. As voice oppositions erode, the functional load of participant-tracking is redistributed cyclically across verbal and nominal domains: material historically associated with nominalization and referential marking may be renewed as verbal predicate morphology, while case-linked and pronominal material may in turn crystallize as bound definite marking. In this process, inherited clitics, articles, and case-pronominal forms remain central resources (cf. Heine and Kuteva 2002, 2011) for grammatical renewal rather than simply residues of earlier structure.

We trace this development through two main pathways. First, in the Bali-Sasak-Sumbawa (BSS) group, we examine the possessive-to-definite pathway. We show how the 3SG possessor/actor form, historically a syntactic sequence comprising a genitive ligature (*n*) and a pronoun (*ia*), has collapsed, through lowering and centering monophthongisation, into the definite suffix *-ne*. This reduction provides a clear diagnostic of the morphophonemic stage in the BSS languages. We then compare this nominal development with dialectal variation in Balinese, especially Badung Balinese, where both the definite marker (*-ne* > *-e/-ə*) and the Undergoer Voice actor clitic (*-na* > *-ə*) have undergone parallel phonological erosion toward neutralized schwa. Recent corpus-based findings from the Balinese SCOPIC Project¹ further show that this POSS/UV actor schwa marking is often prosodically weak, barely audible, or lost altogether. The parallel decay of nominal and verbal marking suggests coordinated movement along the cline syntax > morphology > morphophonemics > zero.

Second, drawing on recent fieldwork on Barrier Islands languages, including Sigulai, Nias, Mentawai, and Enggano, we examine the persistence and transformation of older referential material such as the personal article *si/i*, also reflected in Indonesian (e.g. *Si Miskin*) and Balinese (e.g. *I Buta* 'the blind person'). Nias (Brown 2001) offers especially striking evidence of 'ghost' marking: the earlier article is no longer realized as an independent syllable but survives only as mutation of the noun-initial segment, as in *zekhula* 'the coconut' (< root *sekhula*). Enggano, by contrast, shows refunctionalization in the opposite direction, where a reflex of earlier nominal/definite marking surfaces as the verbal prefix *ki-* (Hemmings and Dalrymple 2026). Kodhi likewise shows how pronominal paradigms, including genitive forms, are integrated into the verbal predicate domain, while definiteness may surface as an infix glide *y-* (e.g. *R<y>obhu* 'the person called Robhu'). Bringing together these conservative category-definite systems with the fused clitics of the BSS languages, the paper maps how referential marking is redistributed across WMP languages under different degrees and directions of voice erosion.

We conclude that as WMP languages move away from earlier V-initial, voice-rich morphological systems toward more SVO-like configurations, the evolution of definite marking functions as a compensatory strategy within a broader cycle of grammatical reorganization. Definite marking is therefore not simply a nominal innovation, but part of the diachronic continuation, redeployment, and renewal of older referential resources under changing morphosyntactic conditions. More broadly, the paper contributes to Austronesian diachronic typology by showing that nominal referential marking and verbal voice change are best understood as part of a cyclic 'nominalization-verbalization' diachronic process of grammatical restructuring, in which discourse-tracking functions are redistributed across domains.

Keywords: Austronesian typology, definiteness, voice erosion, grammatical cycle, morphophonemic attrition

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¹ <https://www.cirhss.org/research-projects/balinese-scopic-project/>