

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

Marcelinus Y.F Akoli^{1,2}

I Wayan Arka^{1,3}

Darif Alfian⁴

1. Australian National University
2. Universitas Nusa Cendana
3. Universitas Udayana
4. Sigulai Language Activist

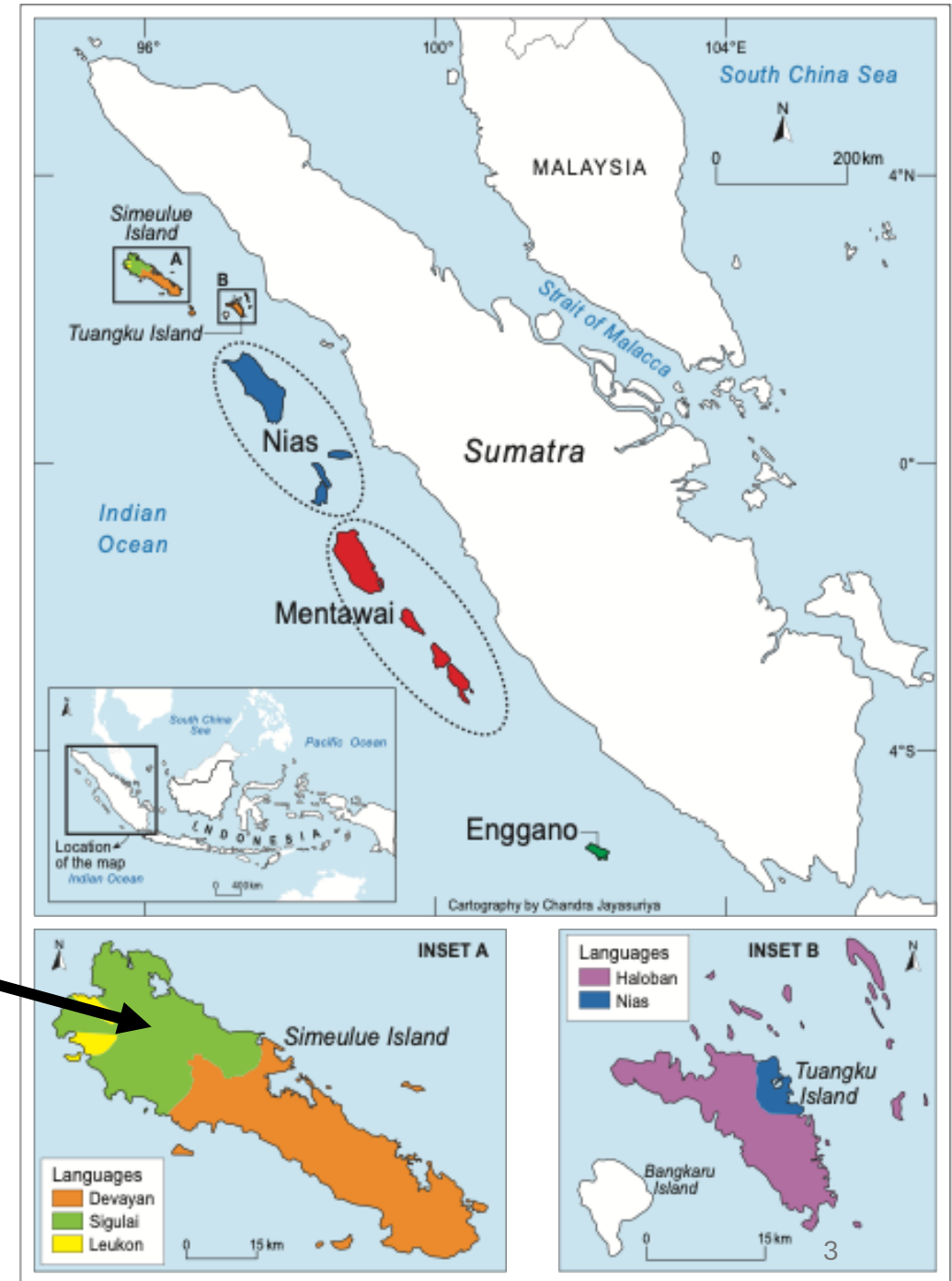


Outline of the talk

- Background: Sigulai, a Barrier Island Language
- The Sigulai *ni*- passive and the wider debates
 - The nature of grammatical categories: categoricity, prominence, and limits/edges of possible systems.
- An overview of Sigulai clausal syntax
 - Phrase structure, grammatical relations, argument coding, voice alternations
- Discussion
 - Methodological premise: categories and gradience with Core Index
 - Application to assess UV and PASS boundaries in Sigulai
 - What do we learn from Sigulai? Typological, theoretical and historical notes
- Final remarks

BACKGROUND

- Sigulai (ISO 639-3: skh):
 - Central Barrier Islands, Austronesian, Simeulue Island, Aceh Province
 - $\pm 20,000$ speakers, all Muslim
- Alternative names:
 - originally **Efulae** (Kähler, 1955), the native term, preferred by its speakers
 - **Sichule** (Kähler, 1959; Nothofer, 1986), **Sikule** (Hammarström et al., 2024), **Sibigo**, **Agəmәi**, **Dau Batu**, **Guali Banua**, and ‘**Bird Language**’ (*Bahasa Burung*).



BACKGROUND: SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

- Multilingual speakers:
 - Typically also speaking Acehnese Malay and Indonesian predominantly, but also Devayan/Simolol, Acehnese, and Jamu
 - Devayan and Simolol speakers typically do not speak Sigulai.
- Language use:
 - Typically informal domains (e.g., domestic and neighbourhood life)
 - But also in certain formal situations (e.g., government offices and public services)
- Vitality status
 - Marginalized and, according to Glottolog ‘threatened’¹



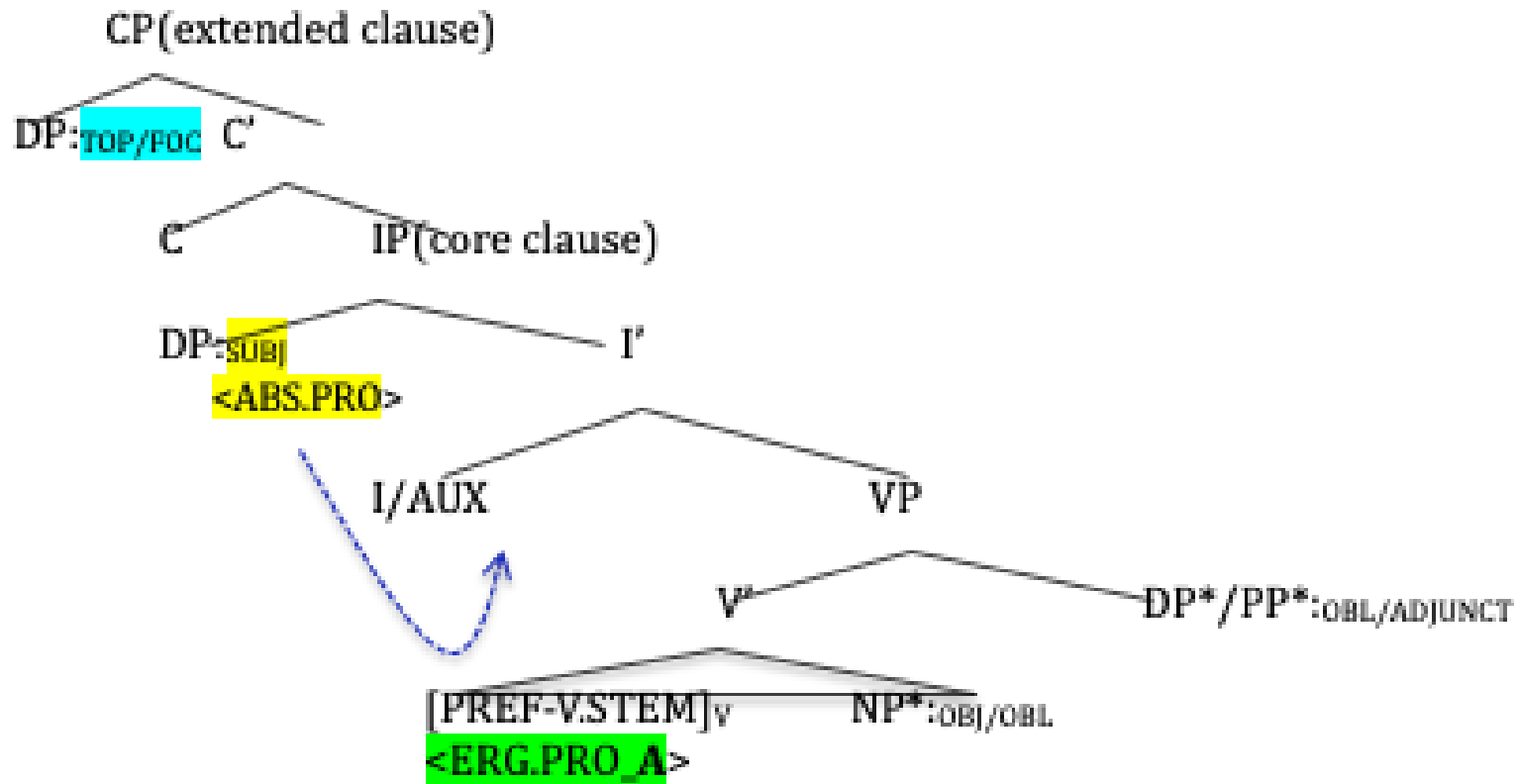
The Sigulai *ni*- passive and the wider debates

- This paper examines *ni*- constructions in Sigulai in relation to the nature of grammatical categories: **categoricity**, **prominence**, and **the limits of possible voice systems**.
- We use the properties of *ni*- to address three wider questions:
 - ❖ Are contrasts such as Core vs Oblique and Passive vs non-Passive **categorical or scalar**?
 - ❖ How is **prominence** distributed across grammatical modules and shaped by interacting constraints?
 - ❖ Why is a detailed description of minority languages crucial for testing **typological generalizations** and refining theory at **the edge of linguistic systems**?

An overview of Sigulai clausal syntax

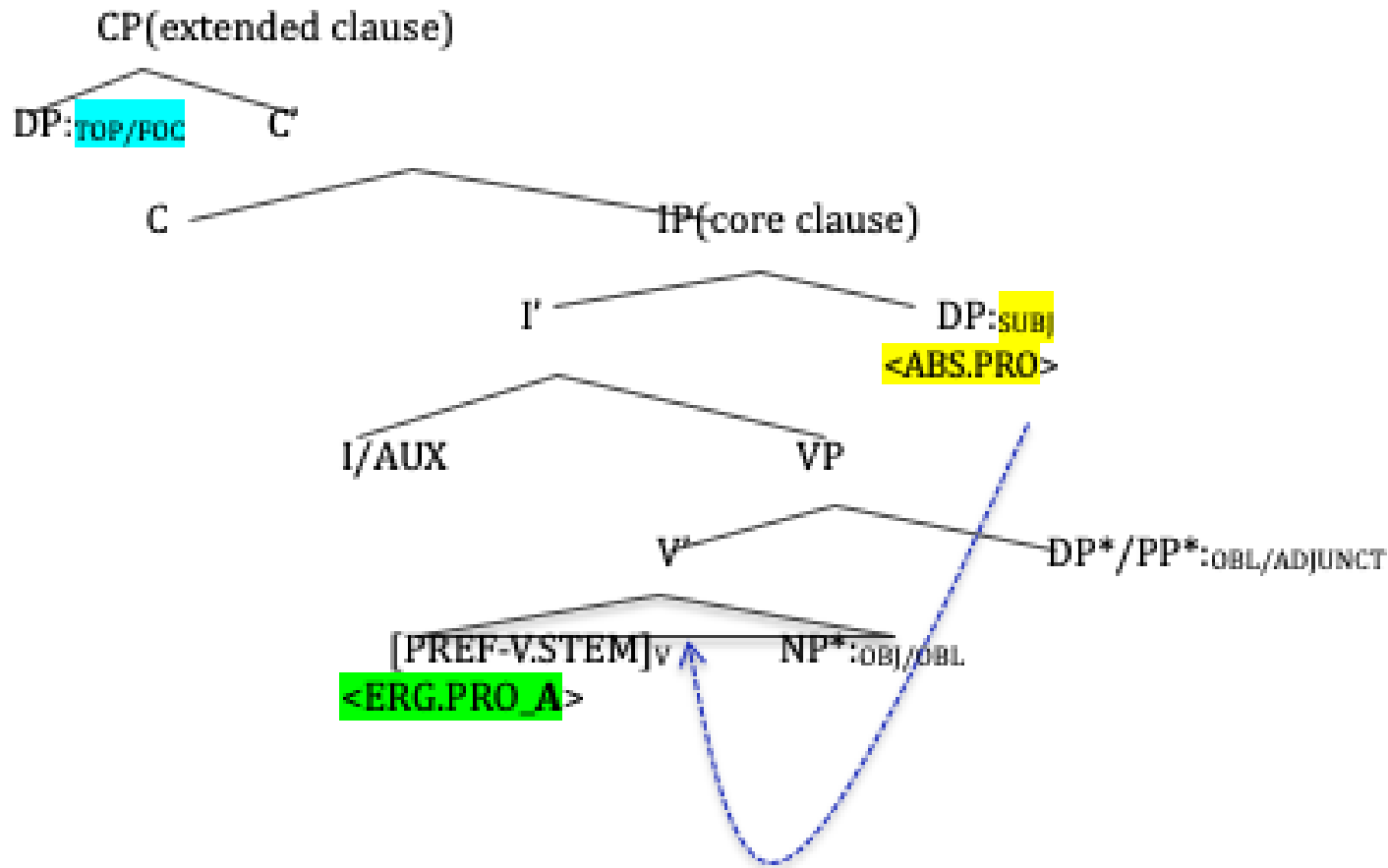
Basic clausal word order,
GRs and their coding, and
voice alternations

Clausal Phrase Structure & Grammatical Relations



- Structurally **left-headed** (e.g. VP with NP:OBJ/PP:OBL following V, AUX precedes VP)
- **Grammatical Relations** are expressed by:
 - **structural positions** (e.g. syntactic SUBJ is [Spec, IP] (in either direction))
 - **pronominal infection** (e.g., bound ABS vs. ERG; cf. [Table 1](#))
 - **categorial marking** (e.g., bare DP/NP for 'core (S/A/P) arguments' vs. PP never expresses core arguments)

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Table 1. Sigulai Pronominal System

	Free	Bound		
	i- ‘EMP, DF’	ERG <A>	ABS <P/S>	POSS
1sg.	<i>(i-)etu</i>	<i>u=</i>	<i>=du</i>	<i>-gu</i>
2sg.	<i>(i-)egə</i>	<i>mu=</i>	<i>=gə</i>	<i>-mo</i>
3sg.	<i>(i-)fəi</i>	<i>i=</i>	<i>=di/=ya</i>	<i>-ni</i>
1PL.Incl.	<i>(i-)fəita</i>	<i>ta=</i>	<i>=ita</i>	<i>-da</i>
1PL.Excl.	<i>(i-)fəaga</i>	<i>məi=</i>	<i>=ga</i>	<i>-ma</i>
2PL.	<i>(i-)fəami</i>	<i>mi=</i>	<i>=ami</i>	<i>-mi</i>
3PL.	<i>(i-)fəila</i>	<i>la=</i>	<i>=ila</i>	<i>-la</i>

Clausal Phrase Structure & Grammatical Relations

- Examples

1. [ietu]_{TOP} [mo[=du]_{SUBJ} mələʔ mənəfi]_{IP}
 1SG PST=1SG.ABS sleep yesterday

 ‘(As for me,) I slept yesterday’
- 2a. [ifəila]_{TOP} [meifakha[=la]_{SUBJ} [man-(s)əsae səlimbut]_{OBJ} fungi]_{IP}
 3PL FUT=3PL.ABS AV-wash blanket tomorrow

 ‘(As for them,) they will wash the blanket tomorrow’
- 2b. [Ifəaga]_{TOP} [butəŋg[=di]_{SUBJ} NON-SUBJ[məi=əkhə] lələʔe]_{IP}
 1PL.EXCL PRS=3SG.ABS 1PL.EXCL.ERG=stare at now

 ‘We are staring at him/her now’

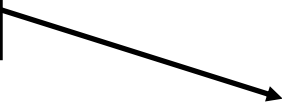
Evidence for Grammatical Voice & syntactic SUBJ (or PIVOT)

- Voice alternations and complex structures:
 - A can appear as SUBJ in AV, or Non-SUBJ in UV/PASS
 - P can appear as SUBJ or OBJ
 - SUBJ shows certain privileged properties (although slightly weakened compared to other AN languages of Indonesia)

Examples of Sigulai showing a voice alternation: AV vs. UV

(Akoli, Arka & Li 2025)

ACTOR VOICE



3. udi mangohe biuk nen
u=di maŋ-ohe biuk nen
PRS=3SG.ABS AV-grab knife Def

A=SUBJ

P=OBJ

‘S/he is grabbing the knife.’

UNDERGOER VOICE



4. biuk nen iohe ifəi
biuk nen i-ohe (ifəi/Joni)
Knife Def 3SG.ERG-grab 3SG/Joni

P=SUBJ

A=Non-SUBJ

‘The knife, (s)he/Joni grabbed.’

Examples of Sigulai showing a voice alternation: UV vs. PASS

(Akoli, Arka & Li 2025)

UNDERGOER VOICE

4. biuk nen iohe ifəi
 biuk nen i-ohe (ifəi)
 Knife Def **3SG.ERG**-grab 3SG

P=SUBJ

A= Non-SUBJ, typical
core argument,
not suppressed

‘The knife, s/he grabbed.’

Peculiar: PASS Agent is
always a bare NP

PASSIVE VOICE

5. biuk nen uniohe ifəi
 biuk nen u=ni-ohe (ifəi)
 Knife Def. PRS-**PASS**-grab 3SG

P=SUBJ

A=demoted to OBL,
possibly suppressed

‘The knife is grabbed (by him/her)’

Evidence for Syntactic SUBJ, Complex structures: Only SUBJ can be syntactically controlled

6 a. *ietu* *meifakha=du* [*i-parekso* *dokter* *yamea* *nen*]
1SG want=1SG.ABS SUBJ 3SG.ERG-check doctor Def. Dem.Dist

‘I want to be checked up by the doctor’

An overt pronoun (e.g., *ietu* ‘1SG’, *ifəi* ‘3SG’) here in UNGRAMMATICAL

b. *Dokter* *yamea* *nen* *meifakha-di* [*mamarekso* *etu*]
doctor Def. Dem.Dist want-3SG.ABS SUBJ AV.check 1SG.ACC

‘The doctor wants to check me up’

OBJ cannot be controlled

c. * *ietu* *meifakha=du* [*dokter* *yamea* *nen* *mamarekso*]
1SG want=1SG.ABS doctor Def. Dem.Dist AV.check OBJ

‘I want to be checked up by the doctor’

Evidence for Syntactic SUBJ (PSA), Complex structures: **SUBJ** relativisation

- Only POSS of SUBJ can be relativised

7.a Nata [you umak-ni ma-fe'e deu mife Tini] ne ula rugi
person REL mother-3SG.POSS AV-give medicine to Tini that already loss
'The person_i [whose mother gave Tini medicine] has already suffered a loss'

b. * Nata [you Tini mo=i-fe'e deu umak-ni] ne ula mei
person REL Tini PST=3SG.ERG=UV.give medicine mother-3SG.POSS that already go
'The person_i [whom his_i mother gave Tini medicine] has left.'

c. * Nata [you Tini ni-fe'e deu umak-ni] ne ula mei
person REL Tini PASS-give medicine mother-3SG.POSS that already go
'The person_i [whom his_i mother gave Tini medicine] has left.'

d. * Nata [you umak ma-fe'e deu=ni mife Tini] ne ula rugi
person REL mother AV-give medicine-3SG.POSS to Tini that already loss
'The person_i [whom mother gave Tini the medicine for] has already suffered a loss'

DISCUSSION

THE NATURE OF GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES: VOICE ALTERNATION & ARGUMENT CLASSES

- **AV** vs. **UV** vs. **PASS**
- Prominence & Obliqueness:
 - SUBJ vs. Non-SUBJ classes
 - Cross-linguistic canonicity vs. Language-specific prototypicality

Methodological premise: categories and gradience

- **Two complementary perspectives**
 - **Comparative concept:**
A passive construction can be identified through cross-linguistic diagnostics: verbal marking, P-orientation, and A-demotion.
 - **Language-specific realisation:**
The implementation of these diagnostics may be gradient and distributed across modules.
- **Our approach.** We combine:
 - **LFG-based modular theoretical framework** (Bresnan et al. 2015, Dalrymple 2023): ‘discrete’ GFs (SUBJ, OBJ, OBL)
 - **Haspelmath (2026):** strict comparative concept of passive
 - **Canonical Typology** (Corbett 2005; Bond 2019): passive as proximity to an ideal type
 - **Prototype Theory** ((Rosch and Mervis 1975; Geeraerts 1989): category membership as clustering of properties
 - **Core Index** (Arka 2017): a measurable implementation of core–oblique gradience
- **Claim:**
Passivehood is assessed as proximity to a canonical/prototypical cluster,
not as a single categorical switch.

Methodological premise & Core Index

- The five-way scale in Core Index:
 - Ranging from **1.00, a prototypical core**, to **0.00, a prototypical oblique**.

Core index:	Types of coreness/obliqueness:	
0.80-1.00	1:	Prototypical Core
0.60 -0.79	2:	Marginal Core
0.40-0.59	3:	Semi Core
0.20-0.39	4:	Marginal Oblique
0.00-0.19	5:	Prototypical Oblique

(Arka 2017:144)

Application to Sigulai *ni-* Passive

Key findings in Sigulai *ni-* clauses:

- The A argument is **demoted**
 - ✓ it loses core prominence for **binding** and **pivot** behaviour
- However, it is **not reduced to a canonical/prototypical oblique**.
 - ✓ Its core index of **0.38** places it in the ‘marginal-oblique’ zone, close to ‘semi-core’
 - ✓ This supports an analysis of *ni-* as passive, but as a **non-canonical passive** with gradient actor demotion.

Argument	Core index	Status
A of AV	1.00	prototypical core
P of AV	0.67	marginal core
A of UV	0.88	prototypical core
A of <i>ni-</i> PASS	0.38	marginal oblique
PP oblique	0.04–0.08	prototypical oblique

See [Appendix 1](#) for the full diagnostic table

Critical evidence, Argument prominence: AV vs. UV vs. PASS

- Demotion: Privileged Syntactic Argument (PSA/SUBJ/PIVOT)
 - UV and PASS alternations results in selecting P as SUBJ, and demoting A to non-SUBJ: evidence from POSS relativisation.

8.a Nata [you umak-ni ma-fe'e deu mife Tini] ne ula rugi
person REL mother-POSS AV-give medicine to Tini that already loss
'The person_i [whose mother gave Tini medicine] has already suffered a loss'

b. * Nata [you Tini mo=i=fe'e deu umak-ni] ne ula mei
person REL Tini PST=3SG.ERG=UV.give medicine mother-3SG.POSS that already go
'The person_i [whom his_i mother gave Tini medicine] has left.'

c. * Nata [you Tini ni-fe'e deu umak-ni] ne ula mei
person REL Tini PASS-give medicine mother-3SG.POSS that already go
'The person_i [whom his_i mother gave Tini medicine] has left.'

Critical evidence:

Core argument prominence & reflexives

- Sigulai has no distinct reflexive pronoun like English *himself/herself*.
- An ordinary pronoun can be bound giving rise to a reflexive reading:
 - This is possible in AV, UV but NOT in PASS:
 - Passivisation results in A losing its core prominence for **binding**

9 [letu]_{TOP} mo-la[=du]_{SUBJ} ma-feʔe [bauk yuw ekhi nen]_{OBJ} [mi etu]_{OBL}
 1SG PST-PERF=1SG.ABS AV-give machete REL good DEF to 1SG
 ‘(As for me), I had given myself the good (best) machete’

SUBJ, ABS: =di	OBJ: bauk	OBL: etu
'AV.give<A:'1SG', T'machete' 'R: '1SG' >		
binder_i		'bindee.refl_i'

Critical evidence:
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 - This is possible in AV, UV but NOT in PASS:
 - Passivisation results in A losing its core prominence for **binding**

10.a. [Joni]_{TOP} mo[=di]_{SUBJ} i-biu?i
 Joni PST-3SG.ABS 3SG.ERG-**UV**.stab
 ‘Joni stabbed himself/him’

SUBJ, ABS =di NonSUBJ, ERG i=

'UV.stab<A:'3SG', P:'3SG'>
 binder i 'bindee.refl i'

- b. [Joni]_{TOP} mo=di ni-biuʔi (ietu)
 Joni PST-3SG.ABS **PASS**-stab 1SG
 'Joni was stabbed (by me/*himself/someone)'

SUBJ, ABS =di (OBL)
| |
'PASS.stab<P:'3SG' | (A:'3SG') , >
binder_i 'bindee.refl_i'

What do we learn? Synchronic analysis

- We focus only on the Sigulai UV-PASS contrast:
 - UV: A remains a prototypical core, index 0.88.
 - PASS *ni-*: A is demoted, index 0.38.
 - Agent demotion is real, but not canonically oblique.
 - Therefore: *ni-* is a **non-canonical passive**.
- Passivehood reveals **gradient actor demotion** (cf. Indonesian *di-* and Balinese *ka-/a* passives as discussed in Arka 2008, 2017, Udayana and Rajeg 2025)

Diagnostic	A of UV	A of PASS <i>ni-</i>
A remains core, highly prominent	yes	reduced
Can bind ABS SUBJ/PIVOT	yes	no
Can be omitted: (i) ERG pron, (ii) co-indexing/cross-referencing NP	(i) no (ii) yes	(i) N/A (ii) yes
Can be realised postverbally (i) ERG pron, (ii) (co-indexing/cross-referencing) free NP	(i) no (ii) yes	(i) N/A (ii) yes
Uniformly flagged as PP Oblique?	no	no
Fronting to the sentence-initial TOP position (i) ERG pron, (ii) (co-indexing/cross-referencing) free NP	(i) no (ii) yes	(i) N/A (ii) yes
Core index, argument classification	0.88, prototypical core	0.38, marginal oblique (i.e. semi-core like, NOT canonically/prototypically Oblique)

What do we learn? Diachronic pressure and ambiguity

- Competition between PASS *ni-* and UV with *i*= ‘3SG.ERG’
 - Preliminary observation: the cross-referencing free NP increasingly preferred.
 - *Ni-* appears to be more commonly used for unknown/generic A
- Interaction with information structure of A prominence:
 - Agent-first information-structural pressure appears to favour A–V–P order (cf. Riesberg et al)
 - This and the absence of P-flagging of PASS A blur (‘active’) UV/PASS boundaries
 - Attrition of *ni-* due to preference of *i*= ‘3SG.A’ or plural *la*= ‘3PL.A’, for passive-like backgrounded P
 - Example (11) has ‘active’/passive ambiguity:

(11) *lfeaga alekni mo-la ni-ila Joni menefi*
 1PL.Incl all PST-PERF PASS-see Joni yesterday
(i) “We all saw Joni yesterday.” (A: ‘we’ —*ni*-VERB —P: “Joni”)
(ii) “We were all seen by Joni yesterday.” (P: “Joni —*ni*-VERB —A: “we”)

What do we learn?

- Some historical-evolutionary basis for the peculiarity of Sigulai *ni-*:
it retains its archaic AN properties
 - In AN/PMP (Blust 2013; Ross 2002) ,
*‘*ni-/<in>*’ was a **perfective realis UV** marker
 - A ‘metathesis/re-analysis’ Malayic pathway (Berg, 2004: 538):
PAN/PMP *-*in-* > UV/PASS *ni-* (Old Malay; e.g. *ni-tanam* ‘PASS-plant’, *ni-raksan-ku* ‘UV/PASS-protect-1SG.POSS’) > PASS *di-* (Modern Indonesian/Malay)

		*PAN/PMP		Sigulai
1.	Infix vs. Prefix	Phonologically conditioned affix - <i>in-/ni-</i>	vs	Prefix <i>ni-</i>
2.	TAM vs. Voice	Perf./Realis & UV marker	vs	PASS Voice

- Sigulai is not Malayic, and it’s unclear if Sigulai follows a similar pathway due to contact or independent development.
- Unlike the Malayic pathway, Sigulai *ni-* A is not a PP Oblique

Final remarks: categories, canonicity, and the edge of voice

- **Comparative theory needs categories**
 - LFG's Grammatical relation/function labels (SUBJ, OBJ, OBL) and Voice types (AV, UV, PASS) are **useful 'discrete' abstractions** for modelling and cross-linguistic comparison.
- **But language-specific grammars do not always respect sharp boundaries**
 - The Sigulai facts suggest that the **diagnostic evidence for assigning these labels may be gradient**.
 - The core index does not replace grammatical functions; it measures the degree of support for assigning an argument to one part of the core–oblique space.
 - Sigulai *ni-* shows **real A-demotion** without a fully canonical oblique agent:
 - ✓ A of UV = **0.88**, prototypical core
 - ✓ A of PASS *ni-* = **0.38**, marginal obliqueThis supports passive analysis, but as a **non-canonical passive with gradient actor demotion**.

Final remarks: categories, canonicity, and the edge of voice

- **Theoretical implication**

- Passivehood is not just a yes/no label.
It is a **prominence-realignment strategy** distributed across morphology, syntax, binding, pivot behaviour, and information structure.

- **Final claim**

- Minority-language data such as Sigulai are not peripheral to theory; they reveal the edges of possible grammatical systems.

- **Take-home message**

- Sigulai ni- is passive *enough to be compared*, but *non-canonical enough to matter*.
- It shows that passivehood is best analysed as a structured space:
comparative concept + canonical benchmark + prototype/core-index gradience.

Final remarks: a summary, back to the three questions

Question	Sigulai answer	Wider implication
Core/oblique and passive/non-passive: categorical or scalar?	Scalar in implementation: A of <i>ni-</i> = 0.38, marginal oblique	‘Discrete’ categories are useful, but canonicity is gradient
How is prominence distributed?	Across voice, clitics, binding, SUBJ/PIVOT, information structure	Passive is a prominence-realignment strategy
Why minority-language description?	Sigulai shows a rare edge-system: passive with non-canonical actor encoding	Theory must be tested at the margins

- **The edge cases are not noise: they are where theory becomes sharper. Sigulai *ni-* sits at the edge of voice.**
- **Core index = a way to quantify prototype effects in grammatical relations.**

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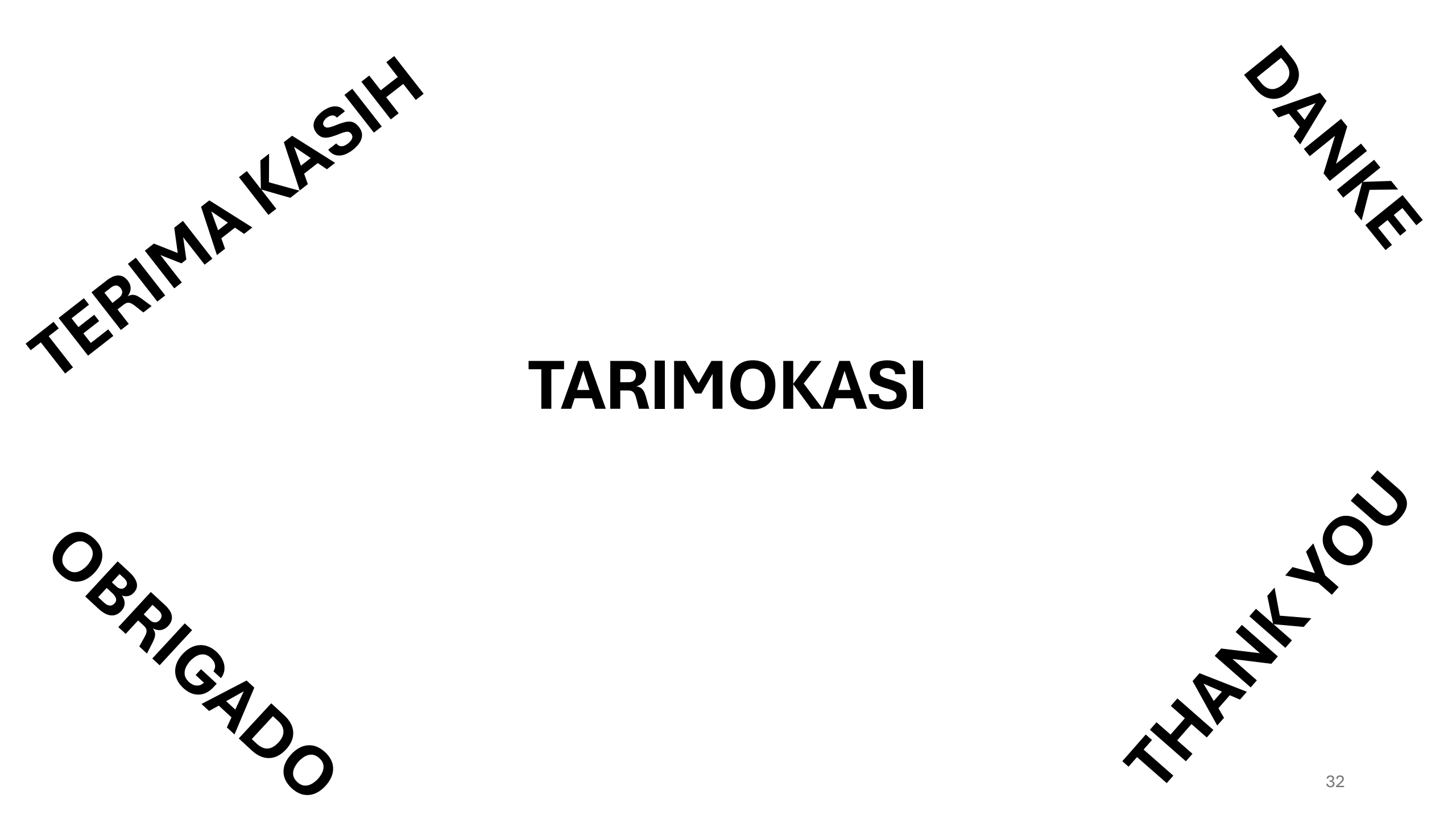
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Appendix 1

Sigulai core index, Full diagnostic table

Scoring: 1 'Yes, strong', 0 'No', 0.5 'partial, weak'						
	Properties	A of AV	P of AV	A of UV	A of ni-V	PP.Obl
1	Subcategorised for, part of the lexical meaning	1	1	1	1	0.5
2	Obligatory	1	1	1	0	0
3	Categorial marking/flagging: bare (1), P-flagged (0), optionally P-flagged (0.5)	1	1	1	1	0.5 or 0 (depending on the verb)
4	QF with alekni 'all'	1	0.5	0.5	0	0
5	Topicalisation without a resumptive pronoun	1	1	0	1	0
6	Left dislocation	1	1	1	0	0
7	Topicalisation of a possessor phrase	1	0	1	0	0
8	Depictive predicate	1	1	1	0	0
9	Elided (=zero) in Imperative	1	1	1	1	0
10	Binding : binder of a core	1	0	1	0	0
11	Pron clitic on the verb complex	1	0	1	0	0
12	Structural positions: (1)Fixed, A-position,	1	0.5	1	0.5	0
	(0.5) slightly flexible within VP					
	(0)Not fixed, non A-position					
	Core Index	12.0	8.0	10.5	4.5	1 or 0.5
		1.00	0.67	0.88	0.38	0.08 or 0.04 ₃₁



TARIMOKASI

TERIMA KASIH

DANKE

THANK YOU

OBRIGADO



Q & A