Arka, I Wayan, Keira Mullan, Marcelinus Y.F Akoli, Y Ghanggo Ate, Emma Keith, Yuchen Li, George Lindsay, and Yana Qomariana. 2026. "When Voice Fades: Grammatical Voice Attrition and Objecthood Continuum " ALS (Australian Linguistics Conference) 2026.

# When Voice Fades: Grammatical Voice Attrition and Objecthood Continuum

Research on Austronesian (AN) grammatical relations has concentrated on SUBJECT/PIVOT and voice, while OBJECT has received much less sustained typological attention (Chen & McDonnell 2019).[1] This imbalance matters in Indonesian-type systems, where voice alternations dissociate semantic role, grammatical function, and discourse prominence. Building on Mithun's (2006) theoretical insight that voice need not presuppose subject, object, or oblique categories, we ask: *what constitutes an object when an inherited voice system persists, restructures, or disappears?*

We analyse a construction-level database of 19 profiles from 10 languages (Table 1): 16 general transitive constructions (Group A) and 4 bare psych-stimulus constructions (Group B). The AN sample with fresh fieldwork-based evidence spans robust voice systems (Balinese (ex. 1), Indonesian, Javanese, Mandailing Batak), an integrated voice-indexing system (Sigulai, ex. 2), a decoupled system lacking productive AV–UV alternation (Mentawai), and a largely post-voice matrix system with restricted embedded alternations (Kodhi, ex. 3). Marori (rich verbal A/U indexing) and Kimaghima (no A/U indexing) provide Papuan controls with no AN voice ancestry, allowing us to test whether indexing alone can sustain objecthood in the absence of productive voice alternation.

Three notions are kept distinct: UNDERGOERHOOD, a semantic/macrorole property; P(ATIENT) I-SALIENCE, the discourse prominence of U as topic, focus, pivot-like centre, or perspectival centre; and OBJECTHOOD, the grammatical status of a non-SUBJ core argument. The analysis targets primary, thematically unrestricted objecthood (LFG OBJ [−r], Bresnan and Kanerva (1989)), while Group B probes restricted object-like arguments licensed by particular predicate classes. Using Canonical Typology and family-resemblance/prototype methodology (Corbett 2005; Rosch & Mervis 1975), we code one semantic and seven morphosyntactic diagnostics: Proto-Patient association (#01), core nominal encoding (#02), structural position (#03), role disambiguation (#04), indexing (#05), U-to-SUBJ/PIVOT alternation ((#06), non-SUBJ core syntax (#07), and independence from P i-salience (#08). Binary sub-diagnostics preserve distinct variation profiles; 0–1–2 scores provide transparent canonicity summaries.

Group A shows a strong association between canonical objecthood and robust syntactic SUBJ/PIVOT (Pearson $r$ = .81, $n$ = 16). The relationship remains substantial when the promotion diagnostic is removed from the composite score ($r$ = .72), reducing circularity. Constructions with robust SUBJ/PIVOT average 12.36/16, compared with 6.5/16 where a syntactic pivot is absent. Canonical U-objects in voice-robust AV constructions score 14–15/16 and alternate productively with U as SUBJ/PIVOT. Yet objecthood is not patienthood: Actor arguments in Balinese and Sigulai UV and Javanese UV remain non-SUBJ core terms (OBJ/T-COMP), scoring 10–12/16 despite receiving 0 on the Proto-Patient diagnostic (Arka & Manning 2008; Subiyanto et al. 2013). Conversely, Sipora Mentawai and the Papuan controls show rigid, non-alternating U-objects scoring 6–8/16. The Papuan comparison is revealing: rich verbal indexing can preserve role identification and core argument status without providing productive U-to-SUBJ/PIVOT alternation. The similarity therefore suggests typological convergence between post-voice AN systems and indexing-dominant Papuan systems: when voice-based mapping weakens, its functions may be redistributed to indexing, order, and discourse, but the resulting objects remain comparatively rigid and less canonical.

Group B supplies a crucial internal counterpoint. Bare psych-stimulus arguments in Group B languages score only 5-7/16 despite robust voice and SUBJ/PIVOT systems. They may be bare and object-like, but remain thematically restricted, may alternate with adpositional coding, and require applicative morphology to enter regular voice alternation (Musgrave 2008; Arka 2017). This shows that object canonicity is determined not by the availability of voice alone, but by the interaction of general voice-mapping resources with predicate-class-specific constraints. Psych predicates impose lexically restricted stimulus mappings that block default access to primary OBJ and regular voice alternation unless applicative derivation licenses it. The pattern supports lexically based architectures such as LFG and, more generally, a Paninian-style specificity principle: narrower lexical-class constraints take precedence over default grammatical mappings. Canonical objecthood is therefore neither a property of semantic Patients nor a uniform property of whole languages; it emerges construction by construction from the interaction of voice architecture, indexing, and lexical argument structure. Put sharply: **grammatical voice makes canonical objecthood available, not automatic; indexing can preserve an object after voice fades, while lexical constraints can restrict it even where voice remains robust**.

[1] In well-described Austronesian languages such as Indonesian (Vamarasi 1986; Musgrave 2001, 2008) and Balinese (Arka 2003, 2019), objecthood has generally been examined as part of broader studies of grammatical relations rather than as a typological category in its own right.

## Selected data and quantitative summary

| | |
|---|---|
| (1) Balinese AV–UV<br>a. tiang ng-ejuk siap-e<br>1SG AV-catch chicken-DEF<br>'I caught the chicken.'<br>b. siap-e Ø-ejuk tiang<br>chicken-DEF UV-catch 1SG<br>'The chicken, I caught.' | (2) Sigulai AV–UV<br>a. u=di maŋ-ohe biuk nen<br>PRS=3SG.ABS AV-grab knife DEF<br>' S/he grabbed the knife.'<br>b. biuk nen i=ohe<br>knife DEF 3SG.ERG=grab<br>'The knife, s/he grabbed.' |
| (3) Kodhi: matrix vs embedded<br>a. ku=icce=ya<br>1SG.NOM=see=3SG.ACC<br>'I saw him/her/it.'<br>b. a bhi ndara pa=icce=nggu=ni<br>DEF.AUG horse REL.O=see=1SG.GEN=3SG.DAT<br>'the horse that I saw' | (4) Indonesian restricted stimulus<br>a. Joni cinta (pada) Maria.<br>'Joni loves Maria.'<br>b. Joni men-cinta-i Maria.<br>Joni AV-love-APPL Maria<br>c. Maria di-cinta-i (oleh) Joni.<br>'Maria is loved by Joni.' |

**Quantitative summary.** Group A (n=16): Pearson r=.81 (p<.001), Spearman ρ=.79; excluding #O6 promotion, Pearson r=.72. Mean object score by SUBJ/PIVOT robustness: 12.36 (score 2), 9.0 (score 1), and 6.5 (score 0). Group B psych stimuli average 6.00 despite SUBJ/PIVOT=2.

Table 1

| Group | Language | Construction | OBJ / PIV | Object Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | Mandailing Batak (Austronesian) | U of AV | 15 / 2 | Canonical, alternating Object |
| A | Balinese (Austronesian) | U of AV | 14 / 2 | |
| A | Sigulai (Austronesian) | A of UV | 12 / 2 | |
| A | Javanese (Austronesian) | A of UV | 10 / 2 | |
| A | Kodhi (Austronesian) | U in matrix transitive | 9 / 1 | Less canonical, or non-alternating/ rigid-Undergoer Object |
| A | Marori (Papuan) | U in indexed transitive | 8 / 0 | |
| A | Sipora Mentawai (Austronesian) | U of AV/indexing transitive | 6 / 0 | |
| A | Kimaghima (Papuan) | U in A–U–V clause | 6 / 0 | |
| B | Balinese | bare psych stimulus | 6 / 2 | |
| B | Colloquial Indonesian | bare psych stimulus | 7 / 2 | |
| B | Javanese | bare psych stimulus | 6 / 2 | |
| B | Sigulai | bare psych stimulus | 5 / 2 | |

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