

## Is Western Austronesian Symmetrical Voice Split Ergativity? Preliminary evidence from Belait (North Borneo).

Western Austronesian languages are well-known for their Symmetrical voice systems, where verbal morphology indicates different mappings of arguments to grammatical functions in multiple transitive constructions (Himmelman 2005; Riesberg 2014). The analysis of these constructions remains controversial, with debate over whether they have Accusative, Ergative or a totally distinct Symmetrical alignment.

This paper presents new data from Belait, a Lower Baram language of North Borneo, a previously undescribed language family. Data is drawn from a documentary corpus of audio-visual texts recorded by me in Brunei (2020- 2023), comprising naturalistic narratives and conversation, semi-structured elicitation tasks such as picture description and elicitation/ acceptability judgements).

Belait has two transitive voice alternations, Actor Voice (AV) and Undergoer Voice (UV). In AV (See Example 1, below), the actor, *idieh rebbian* 'the old man', occurs clause-initially and is indexed by the verbal affix <um>, while the undergoer argument, *pu'on butien yieh* 'the coconut tree', is the object. In contrast, in UV (2), the undergoer occurs in the clause-initial position and is indexed by the verbal affix <in>, and the actor is a non-subject core argument. Importantly, the two alternations are said to be symmetrical since both voices are equally morphologically marked and both require two arguments.

In this paper, I first present syntactic tests for subjecthood and core-argumenthood to show the status of Belait's core arguments in AV and UV. Testing for features such as word order, definiteness (6, 7), relativization (3, 4), control and quantifier float ( provides evidence of almost perfect syntactic symmetry, closely reflecting previous findings in a range of Western Austronesian languages (Riesberg 2014; Hemmings 2016; McDonnell 2016; Arka 2019). These results provide evidence of two basic transitive clause-types in Belait: In AV the Actor appears as the subject, thereby patterning syntactically with intransitive subjects, while in UV the Undergoer appears as the subject, thereby patterning syntactically with intransitive subjects. These alternations can be analysed as Symmetrical Alignment (following Riesberg 2014, McDonnell 2016 a.o.), or split-ergative/accusative alignment where AV appears in transitive accusative clauses and UV appears in transitive ergative clauses (following (Arka & Manning 1998; Hemmings 2017).

The second part of the study provides further support for a split-alignment analysis.

An examination of the frequencies of AV and UV in naturalistic discourse and their semantic features presents an unexpected asymmetry: AV clauses can be interpreted as perfective or non-perfective (9); while UV can *only* occur in perfective contexts (10). This restriction has not previously been explored in Western Austronesian languages, although it is attested in at least 3 other Lower Baram languages (Clayre 1996; Blust 2003). This finding reflects the cross-linguistic pattern of aspect-based split ergativity where ergative clauses are always perfective and non-ergative clauses are apparently always non-perfective (Dixon 1994; Coon 2012). I argue that an aspect-based split ergative analysis is plausible for Belait where AV is accusative and aspectually non-restricted, while UV is ergative and perfective.

## Examples:

- (1) Idieh rebbian yieh m-innaad pu'on butien yieh. **Basic AV Clause**  
Old man DET AV-climb tree coconut DET  
'The old man climbs/ climbed the coconut tree.'
- (2) pu'on butien yieh ngaa n-innaad idieh rebbian yieh. **Basic UV Clause**  
tree coconut DET PERF UV-climb old man DET  
'the old man climbed the coconut tree' OR 'the coconut tree was climbed by the old man.'
- (3) anaak yieh [no \_\_ kumaan nukaan yieh] anaak kau **Relativization of Actor**  
child DET [REL \_\_ AV.eat rice DET] child 1.sg.POSS  
The child who is eating the rice is my child
- (4) \*Anaa [no nukaan yieh kinaan \_\_ ] anaak kau  
child [REL rice DET UV.eat \_\_] child 1.sg.POSS
- (5) Nukaan yieh [no \_\_ ngaa kinaan anaak yieh] ninaa tak-jung mijia **Relativization of Undergoer**  
rice DET [REL \_\_ PERF UV.eat child DET] PV.put on table  
'the rice that my child ate was put on the table'
- (6) \*nukaan yieh [no anaak kumaan \_\_]  
rice DET [REL child AV.eat \_\_]
- (7) jariang anaak minnaad gunung **No definiteness/specificity restrictions**  
rarely child AV.climb mountain  
'children rarely climb mountains'
- (8) jariang gunung (ngaa) ninnaad anaak  
rarely mountain (PERF) UV.climb child  
'children rarely climbed mountains'
- (9) ashau sirigalia yieh (ngaa/kira) kumaan putaa yieh **AV = perfective or non-perfective**  
dog fox DET PERF/FUT AV.eat fish DET  
the dog ate the fish OR the dog is going to eat the fish OR the dog is eating the fish
- (10) putaa yieh ngaa/\*kira kinaan ashau sirigalia yieh **UV = perfective**  
fish DET PERF/\*FUT PV.eat dog fox DET  
the dog ate the fish NOT \*the dog is going to eat the fish OR \*the dog is eating the fish

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