

Malayic active voice *meN-*: One prefix or two?

The Malayic languages (Austronesian) are known for having an active/passive voice alternation, with verbs in Standard Malay and Indonesian (SM/SI) bearing a *meN-* active prefix or a *di-* passive prefix:

- (1) SM/SI active ‘beat’: *meN-pukul* > *memukul*; passive ‘beat’ *di-pukul*

Here we bring together a range of evidence to argue that the active prefix *meN-* is best analyzed as the combination of two parts — the syllabic *me-* and homorganic nasal *N-* — and that this perspective helps us account for the attested variation in voice prefix patterns in regional and colloquial Malayic languages. Such evidence includes the following, spanning from phonological to syntactic:

- Where the nasal *N-* replaces the onset of the verbal stem, verbal reduplication copies the stem with the nasal onset but not the prefix *me-*; e.g. reduplication of SM/SI active ‘beat’ *memukul* (1) results in *memukul-mukul*, not **memukul-pukul*. While prior works have explained this as an effect of “base-reduplicant faithfulness” (McCarthy & Prince 1995), it is explained quite naturally if *N-* is a separate prefix, in the domain of reduplication unlike *me-*.
- Under our two-prefix hypothesis, individual Malayic language varieties might come to associate *me-* alone or *N-* alone with the function of active voice. Regional varieties provide evidence for both possibilities. In Riau Indonesian (Gil 2002) and Salako Kendayan (Malayic, West Borneo; Adelaar 2005), the passive marker *di-* can co-occur with *N-*, supporting the possibility of a language treating *me-* alone as a reflex of active voice. In Jakarta Indonesian (Wouk 2004), choice of *meN-* vs *N-* correlates with slight differences in measures of transitivity; this is explained if *N-* alone is learned as the reflex of active voice and the optional *me-* then comes to be associated with other semantic distinctions. (And similarly for the aspectual functions associated with *meN-* in SM described by Soh & Nomoto 2009.)
- In Desa (Malayic, West Borneo; Sommerlot 2020), active verbs may bear *N-* or *meN-*, but only the former allows non-subject *wh*-movement across it. We will present such data in detail and explain the incompatibility with *me-* in these movement contexts.

At the talk, we put forward a syntactic analysis for the structure of Malayic verbs, wherein *me-* and *N-* realize different verbal functional heads (Voice and *v*). We will show that word order patterns in *di*-passive and so-called “bare passive” clauses serve as clues to the language learner to posit an analysis where *meN-* is decomposed, even in Malayic language varieties without clear morphological evidence for their decomposition, surveyed above.

(420 words; for in-person presentation)

References:

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