# Discourse Perspectives on Syntax

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CHAPTER FOUR

# Ergative, Passive, and Active in Malay Narrative

*Paul J. Hopper*

## 1. Introduction

There is often an assumption, in discussions of "discourse grammar," that discourse and sentence-level grammar constitute separate domains which may, ultimately, be shown to influence one another. If this is so, then we may proceed to study each of these levels independently; indeed, we may deny that discourse has any relevance for "syntax" defined as the formal aspects of sentences. Sentences may then be viewed simply as the "building blocks" of discourse, as Grimes and Glock suggest in their paper of 1970: "The 'chunks' [of information], which are sentences, have their own set of internal relationships; nothing here denies the validity of sentence grammar within its domain [p. 415]." Alternatively, discourse grammar is held to be a speculative agenda, to be postponed until the answers are in from syntax, as Morgan (1981) has suggested: "The burden is thus clearly on the discourse theorist to show that at least a fraction of these [syntactic] problems have explanations in discourse and/or functional terms. Frankly, I am skeptical that such explanations will ever be achieved [p. 144]." Morgan assumes that sentence-level structuralism represents a uniformly received body of knowledge, a "state of the art" which subsequent research must take as its point of departure:

> For example, how could such a [functionalist] theory explain cases of apparent functional disunity, like extraposed relatives, as in *the woman died in 70,000 B.C. who invented the wheel,* or verb-particle constructions like *John put the cat out,* to say

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nothing of the numerous apparently purely formal conditions and constraints proposed by generative grammarians from Ross (1967) to Chomsky (1981)? [p. 144].

The present paper is not intended as a polemic against ideas such as these; yet Morgan's very examples cry out for discussion along functionalist lines. The first sentence (*The woman died in 70,000 B.C. who invented the wheel*) sounds utterly bizarre to me; I cannot place it into any context, no matter how hard I try, and it thus seems to be an example of a sentence that a correct theory ought NOT to account for.[1] As to the second example, involving the well-known verb–particle construction, the discourse explanation seems rather obvious: with some modifications, the particle appears to the right of the object precisely when the object is anaphoric, that is, is either a pronoun or a previously mentioned noun. At the sentence level this distribution is hard to state, as the structural description of the rule has to make reference to (*a*) pronouns [obligatory], and (*b*) nouns [optional]. THE AFFECTED NPs CAN ONLY BE CAPTURED AS A CLASS BY REFERENCE TO DISCOURSE. It is ironic that the very two examples that Morgan presents to show the impossibility of discourse grammar illustrate nicely the very reasons why sentence-level syntax will not work: (*a*) it is forced to claim grammaticality for sequences which no amount of introspection can provide a setting for; and (*b*) it provides the WRONG explanation for the grammaticality of quite ordinary sequences.

In this paper I discuss some central constructions in a variety of Written Malay with a view, implicitly, to demonstrating that no approach to grammar (morphology and syntax) that separates LOCAL (more or less: clause level) from GLOBAL (more or less: discourse level) factors can work. I thus reject all approaches that insist on the autonomy of the "sentence," both the building blocks approach of Grimes and others, and the generative-transformationalist approach of much current work on syntax.

A consequence of the decision to work with discourse material is the assumption that data from "intuition," and indeed any data which were presented for the purposes of linguistic analysis, are suspect. An ideal corpus

[1] And, indeed, Morgan's "sentence" is ungrammatical precisely because it shows functional disunity, that is, a lack of concord between its form (extraposed relative) and the function which this form must have. I take this function to be something like discourse salience of the relative clause and low focus on the predicate. In Morgan's "sentence" we have no way of evaluating the relative salience of the main clause predicate vis-à-vis the relative clause without a context, and we can only find it odd that the date of this person's death overrides in significance the information that the inventor of the wheel was a woman. The whole example is thoroughly misbegotten, and emphasizes the methodological importance of working with **natural rather than** fake data. In an essay of Quiller-Couch's I find the following example of an extraposed relative: "In literature as in life he makes himself felt who not only calls a spade a spade but has the pluck to double spades and redouble." Here the lame main-clause predicate *makes himself felt* would be incongruous in the salient position at the end of the sentence, and the main point of the sentence is in the relative clause itself; hence the extraposition.





is one which is extensive enough to provide numerous examples of the construction being studied together with ample discourse contexts for each example.

My corpus for this paper will be the Malay autobiography of Abdullah 'Munshi' (ᶜAbd Allāh ibn ᶜAbd al-Qadir, Munshi), known as the *Hikayat Abdullah*. Abdullah Munshi was born in Malacca in 1795, and died on the Hajj in 1855, probably in Mecca. The language of the autobiography is perhaps best characterized as "early modern" Malay, having affiliations with both modern Standard Malay and the antecedent classical language of the traditional Hikayat ('histories'). In regard to the constructions being discussed here, there are slight differences between Abdullah's usage and modern usage. I therefore regard the corpus as a unitary idiolect describable in its own terms and having linguistic interest as a self-contained variety of Malay. Abdullah was a native speaker of Malay (there is ample evidence in the autobiography and in the accounts of his contemporaries for this fact); thus my use of the term "idiolect" should not be viewed as equivalent to "idiosyncratic."

## 2. Passive and Ergative: An Outline

### *2.1. The Malay "Passive"*

The two constructions that form the core of this paper share a common morphology usually called "passive." This morphology is best presented as having one form for first and second person pronoun agents, and another form for third person agents.

With first person pronoun agents, the stem of the verb is prefixed with the proclitic form of the pronoun *aku* 'I', namely *ku-:*

*sa-telah satu muka kitab itu* ***ku-*** *bacha*
after one page book the 1AGT read
'after I had read one page of the book' (44)[2]

The gloss 1AGT is to be interpreted as first person proclitic agent of the passive.

With third person agents, the prefix *di-* appears on the verb, and the agent, if a pronoun, is enclitic to the prefixed verbal stem in the form *-nya:*

*maka* ***di-*** *buboh-* ***nya-*** *lah tanda-tangan-* ***nya***
then PASS fix 3AGT LAH signature his
'then he affixed his signature' (27)

[2] References are to the Malay Literature Series edition of the *Hikayat Abdullah*, in two volumes (Abdullah 1932), paged continuously.

The gloss PASS refers to the passive prefix for third person agents, and 3AGT glosses the agentive pronoun *-nya*. The gloss LAH is used for a discourse particle which will be discussed later. With noun agents an agentive phrase similar to the English *by*-phrase is added:

*ada pun aku di- jualkan oleh ibu- ku ka-pada enam*
happen PUN I PASS sell by mother my to six
*tujoh orang*
seven person
'So it happened that I was sold by my mother to six or seven people (12)

(a reference to symbolic adoption). Occasionally the preposition *oleh* is omitted. The agent may also be absent, in which case the passive is signaled solely by the verbal prefix *di-*:

*tiada ia di- lepaskan*
not he PASS set-free
'he is not set free' (19)

The patient of the passive construction is either unmarked or is signaled by the "accusative" preposition *akan:*

*Hata maka sa-telah sudah di- dengar oleh Tuan Raffles akan*
now then after already PASS hear by Mr. ACC
*perkataan dalam surat itu . . .*
words in letter that
'Now when Mr. Raffles had heard the words in that letter . . . ' (85)

This accusative preposition is not found when the patient precedes the verb. The preposition is in complementary distribution with the verbal suffix *-kan,* however, and with this suffix the patient may be pre- or postposed. The suffix *-kan* has a number of local functions in Malay, including causative and "instrumental" (denoting that the patient of the verb is the instrument with which the action is carried out); the general function appears to be that of "transitivization," as discussed in Hopper and Thompson (1980:260–261).

### 2.2. *The Two Constructions Passive and Ergative*

The existence of two distinct structural types associated with passive morphology in Malay has been noted by Chung (1975) and Cartier (1979) in their discussions of Modern Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia). In this paper I do not undertake to compare Abdullah's usage with that of Bahasa Indonesia beyond noting that in earlier Malay the structural difference between the two passives appears less rigid, and that there is some overlap between the





two constructions in discourse. This overlap suggests, of course, that the "grammatical" difference between the two constructions is derivative of their discourse contexts. Like Cartier (1979), I regard one of the constructions as ergative and the other as passive. In the discussion which follows the passive is distinguished from the ergative on both grammatical and discourse-functional grounds. I later show that it is the discourse-functional difference which is primary, and that the grammatical difference should be seen as derivative of the discourse function. Cartier (1979) similarly argues for the distinction of passive and ergative in both grammar and discourse, but does not assign priority to one distinction over the other.

Fundamentally the passive is distinguished from the ergative in two ways:

1. The patient NP precedes the verb:
   *maka dua puncha kiri kanan itu di- matikan*
   then two ends left right the PASS knot
   'and the two ends to the right and left are knotted' (18)
2. The discourse role of the passive is a BACKGROUNDING one. It tends to denote states, customary actions, descriptions, and the like, and is used less often to denote actions which happen once or which provide a story line. In some of these respects the Malay passive resembles the English passive, for example, in its frequent use to describe artifacts. Some examples of the discourse functions of the Malay passive are as follows:

(*a*) Customary or habitual actions
*karna demikian- lah di- perbuat oleh orang tua-tua*
because thus LAH PASSdo by person old:PLUR
'for this is the way the old people do it' (11)
(*b*) Resultant state
*ada pun sakalian baris itu di- atur- nya tiga-tiga lapis*
happen PUN every rank the PASS draw-up 3AGT three fold
'It happened that they had drawn up all the ranks in three rows.' (77)
(*c*) Indefinite agent
*dan tiada pula engkau di- hinakan orang*
and not also you PASS scorn person
'Moreover, people will not scorn you.' (17)
(*d*) Descriptions
*ada pun apit China itu di- perbuat dari-pada rotan sega*
it-is PUN press Chinese the PASS make out-of rattan fine
'Now the Chinese press was made out of the finest rattan . . . ' (18)

Like the English passive, and unlike the passive in certain other languages, the Malay passive occurs freely with and without an agent.

The construction named ergative is formally similar to the passive. The prime distinguishing feature of the ergative is that the patient NP follows the

verb, whereas in the passive the patient always precedes. Frequently the patient NP of the ergative is preceded by the accusative preposition *akan*.

In its discourse function the ergative serves to FOREGROUND events (cf. Hopper, 1979c). It has a predilection for individuated actions, generally of a concrete, visible kind (Cartier, 1979:181), and usually sequenced (Hopper, 1979c). Thus passages like the following abound in the corpus:

*Ada pun api- nya itu datang dari sebab orang kapal itu minum*
happen PUN fire the that came from reason men ship the smoke
*cherutu di- champakkan- nya puntong cherutu itu ka-dalam kapal*
cheroot PASS throw-away 3AGT stub cheroot the into ship
*maka menjangkit- lah ka-pada tali-tali itu, maka di- makan-*
and spread LAH into ropes the and PASS consume
*nya- lah kapal itu*
3AGT LAH ship the
'Now the fire came about because the crewmen were smoking cheroots, and they threw away the stubs into the boat, and the fire spread to the ropes and burned up the ship.' (91)

The ergative foregrounds "transitive" events. Intransitive events, such as *menjangkit* 'spread to' in the passage cited, are foregrounded by attaching the discourse particle *-lah* to the verb. This particle may also be added to the ergative verb—but not to the passive verb—if the narrated event is of special importance.

#### 2.2.1. The Ergative with Preverbal Patient

We have seen that the canonical word order for the ergative is Verb–Agent–Patient. The patient is thus placed after the verb, and it is this positional characteristic which basically distinguishes the ergative from the passive. Yet ergative patients may also precede the verb. Almost always when this happens the particle *pun* follows the patient. Another strategy for preposing patients is to quantify the NP with *semua-nya* 'all of them'; this quantifier is then "floated" to the right of the patient, so that it immediately precedes the verb. Both strategies are examplified in the following passage:

*Maka segala pengana itu pun di- bahagikan- lah ka-pada segala*
and all cakes the PUN PASS distribute LAH to all
*budak-budak, dan wang- nya di- ambil oleh guru- nya itu, dan*
boy:PLUR and money the PASS take by teacher the that and
*bunga chandana semua-nya di- bahagikan.*
flower sandalwood all-of-them PASS distribute
'Then all the cakes were passed around to all the boys, and the money





was taken by the teacher, and the sandalwood blossoms were all passed around.' (20)

Here both *pun* and *semua-nya* are used to front the patient NP before the ergative verb. It will be noticed, however, that the second ergative clause in the passage, *dan wang-nya di-ambil oleh guru-nya itu* 'and the money was taken by the teacher', is not distinguishable from the passive. Indeed, it is only because it is part of an event sequence (i.e., a semantic criterion) that we are entitled to refer to this clause as ergative. Such clauses are rare, but they do occur, especially when the patient is highly topical and anaphoric. Another example is the following:

*maka duit itu di- ambil oleh ibu-bapa- nya, di- belikan- nya*
then money the PASS take by parents his PASS use-to-buy 3AGT
*penganan atau barang-barang makanan, di- makan- nya*
cakes or things eating PASS eat 3AGT
'Then his parents take the money and use it to buy cakes or other things to eat, and they eat them.' (12)

In the first clause the patient *duit itu* 'the money (just mentioned)' precedes the verb without *pun* or a floated quantifier. Again, the clause is formally indistinguishable from a passive.

The point is that although there is a very high correlation between ergative and VSO word order on the one hand and passive and OVS word order on the other, the correlation is not absolute. Evidently the VSO word order itself is not a grammaticalized signal of foregrounding, but is rather a reflex of something else. I return to this at the end of the paper, where I suggest that the VSO word order is simply a strategy for focusing the verb.

## 3. Transitivity

Is there some less subjective and intuitive means by which the semantic difference between ergative and passive clauses can be characterized?

I have referred to the fact that both passive and ergative clauses are transitive in the sense that the action signaled by them includes reference to a patient and, usually, an agent. In this section I will examine this premise in detail, making use of the Transitivity Theory elaborated by myself and Sandra Thompson (Hopper and Thompson, 1980).

### *3.1. The Transitivity Theory*

In the work referred to, Transitivity is viewed not as a simple matter of the number of participant NPs, but as a discourse-derived relationship which is

stronger in proportion to the intensity of the event which the clause is reporting. The intensity—that is, THE DEGREE OF TRANSITIVITY—of the event is measured as an aggregate of a number of parameters, each of which contributes in some way to the transitivity relationship. The parameters are, it should be emphasized, discourse parameters; yet either alone or in combination they can be shown to have consistent typological effects on the morphosyntax of the clause. The article cited documents in detail these local effects. The parameters are the following:

A. *Participants:* A clause with both an agent and a patient is more Transitive than a clause with only one of these.
B. *Aspect:* A clause containing a telic (point-oriented) predicate is more Transitive than a clause whose predicate is atelic.
C. *Kinesis:* Clauses which signal an action of some kind, involving movement in either patient or agent, are more Transitive than those in which no action is signaled.
D. *Affectedness of patient:* A clause containing a patient which is physically affected by the action of the verb is more transitive than one whose patient is not affected.
E. *Polarity:* Affirmative clauses are more Transitive than negative clauses.
F. *Modality:* Clauses containing a realis predicate (i.e., a predicate which reports a real occurrence) are more Transitive than those in an irrealis mood such as subjunctive.
G. *Potency of agent:* A clause whose agent is human or animate is more Transitive than one whose agent is inanimate or incapable of spontaneous action.
H. *Individuation of patient:* Clauses whose patients are definite/referential are more Transitive than clauses whose patients are indefinite/nonreferential.
I. *Volitionality:* A clause whose action is carried out deliberately by the agent is more transitive than one whose agent is acting without intention.
J. *Punctuality:* A clause whose predicate occurs without a perceptible transition between onset and conclusion is more Transitive than one whose predicate has discernible duration.

These parameters help define Transitive clauses which typically have morphosyntactic properties of Transitivity and which function in discourse to carry the more salient, foregrounded, actions. It should therefore be the case that in Malay the ergative clause will typically have a higher index for the Transitivity parameters than the passive clause. Fifty clauses of each type were taken from random pages of the corpus; on each page selected,





every clause of each type was included in the sample. In addition, 50 clauses of a third clause type, the *meng-* active (a construction not yet discussed), were also examined for the same purpose.

### 3.2. *Criteria for Applying the Parameters*

The criteria that were used to compare the clauses were objective ones so far as this was possible. Wherever possible, a concrete morphemic or syntactic construction was used as the criterion, or an obvious semantic feature like 'human'. Occasionally, this meant that the Transitivity parameter in question had to be extended or restricted somewhat. For the purposes of the present study, the following criteria were among those adopted:

1. Parameter (D), affectedness of patient, was defined as plus if the patient NP was preceded by the preposition *akan,* or if the verb contained the suffix *-kan.* The meanings of *-kan/akan* are compatible with 'affected patient' but not entirely commensurate with it.
2. With regard to Parameter (H), patients were considered to be definite if they consisted of a proper name, a personal pronoun, or a noun restricted by one of the definite articles or other definite modifiers (demonstratives, possessives, etc.).
3. With regard to Parameter (G), agents were considered to be potent that is, capable of spontaneous action, if they were human, and not otherwise.

These restrictions slightly bias the conclusions away from the high end of the transitivity continuum, and thus conservatively reduce the degree of difference between ergative and passive clauses. For example, the parameter of patient individuation (H) should be plus if the patient is indefinite, provided it is referential; but the parameter as defined here allows only for definite/referential patients to be individuated.

The criterion used for determining whether a clause was ergative or passive was a simple one involving word order. Basically, clauses with verb-initial word order were treated as ergative, and clauses with patient-initial word order were treated as passive. We have noted that this distinction occasionally fails, in that semantically ergative clauses may have an initial patient. If the patient was marked with *pun* or a rightward floated quantifier, the clause was counted as ergative. The effect of marking an NP with *pun* or a quantifier to the right is to dislocate the NP from the rest of the clause, thus effectively allowing the clause to begin with the verb. This dislocation derives in turn from the "lookback" distance between the referent of the NP in question and its previous reference in the discourse; the relationship between such phenomena involving anaphoric "continuity" (Givón, 1983)

and ergative case-marking in Malay deserves further research. Clauses in which the patient preceded the verb without an overt topicalizer like *pun* or a quantifier were rigidly counted as passive. Again, this procedure introduces a slight bias in favor of the passive, in other words, a bias which tends to narrow slightly the difference between ergative and passive. The objective of such adjustments was to ensure that subjective assignment of values was kept to a minimum, and that where they were necessary they should not result in exaggerated claims but if anything in understatements.

### 3.3. *Transitivity Index of a Sample Clause*

As an illustration of how the Transitivity index of each of the 150 clauses examined was calculated, we will take the following clause:

*karna binatang itu di- laparkan beberapa hari*
because animals the PASS starve several day
'because the animals had been starved for several days' (51)

This clause qualifies as a passive one, since the patient immediately precedes the passive verb. The Transitivity index of this clause was 5, since out of a possible 10 points for the Transitivity parameters it scored as follows:

A. *Participants:* 0
The clause contains a patient (*binatang itu*), but no expressed agent.
B. *Aspect:* 0
The action of the verb is atelic, since the act *laparkan* 'starve, keep hungry' is not point-oriented.
C. *Kinesis:* 0
No action or motion is predicated by the verb.
D. *Affectedness of patient:* 1
The verb has the suffix *-kan,* therefore the patient is considered to be affected.
E. *Polarity:* 1
The clause is affirmative, and is therefore plus for this parameter.
F. *Modality:* 1
The clause is realis ("indicative").
G. *Potency of agent:* 0
No agent being specified, the clause cannot be marked plus for this feature.
H. *Individuation of patient:* 1
The patient NP *binatang itu* includes the article/demonstrative *itu.*
I. *Volitionality:* 1
The context makes it clear that the act of depriving the animals (elephants) of food was done intentionally in order to weaken them.





J. *Punctuality:* 0
The event continued over an extended period of time (*beberapa hari,* 'several days').

For the most part there was little difficulty in assigning the values of the parameters to a given clause. In the clause discussed here, the values are nearly all objective—some through overt morphosyntactic markers (e.g., D, H), some through unambiguous semantic features (C, F), and some through context. The volitionality of the act, for example, is determined by the facts of the narrative: One of the strategies involved in capturing a wild elephant is to trap it and deprive it of food for a while in order to weaken it.

## 4. Analysis of Discourse Functions of Major Clause Types

The transitivity index of each of the 150 clauses in the sample was calculated in this way, and averages for each type were obtained. For passive and ergative clauses the averages for the 50-clause sample of each type were:

Passive: 4.78
Ergative: 8.62

The ergative clause thus emerges as significantly more Transitive in the composite sense than the passive clause. This local (i.e., semantic and morphosyntactic) difference corresponds to the global (discourse) functional difference between the two. Typologically, the Transitivity parameters are significant at both of the levels referred to here as "local" and "global":

1. They define at the local level the assignment of case and aspect morphosyntax.
2. They converge at points of the discourse where highlighting of the action and advancement of the story line occur.

But in different languages, and in different constructions in the same language, these parameters interact in different ways, so that some may make a more important contribution than others. The data concerning the passive and ergative in Malay suggest that OVERALL the ergative construction is considerably higher in transitivity than the passive. But this overall figure does not necessarily mean that the difference is equal for each parameter, nor that the ergative is higher than the passive in each parameter (although this might happen to be the case). It is therefore interesting to compare the ergative and the passive scores parameter by parameter.

TABLE 1
*Percentages of Passive and Ergative Clauses with Plus for Each of the Transitivity Parameters*

| PARAMETER | PASSIVE | ERGATIVE |
|---|---|---|
| A. Participants | 68 | 90 |
| B. Aspect | 48 | 88 |
| C. Affected patient | 40 | 64 |
| D. Kinesis | 42 | 84 |
| E. Polarity | 90 | 98 |
| F. Modality | 82 | 90 |
| G. Agent potency | 48 | 88 |
| H. Patient individuation | 84 | 94 |
| I. Volitionality | 60 | 88 |
| J. Punctuality | 28 | 70 |

Table 1 shows for the 50 passive and 50 ergative clauses in the sample the percentage of clauses marked as plus for each of the parameters. Of the 10 parameters, 4 (aspect, kinesis, potency of agent, and punctuality) show a difference of 40 percentage points or more between ergative and passive. For the other 6 the difference is less than 30 percentage points. In descending order of differential, the parameters are thus ranked as in Table 2:

TABLE 2
*Ranking of Differentials between Ergative and Passive Clauses for Each Transitivity Parameter*

| RANK | PARAMETER | % PLUS IN ERGATIVE | % PLUS IN PASSIVE | DIFFERENCE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1= | Kinesis | 84 | 42 | 42 |
| 1= | Punctuality | 70 | 28 | 42 |
| 3= | Aspect | 88 | 48 | 40 |
| 3= | Agent potency | 88 | 48 | 40 |
| 5 | Volitionality | 88 | 60 | 28 |
| 6 | Affected patient | 64 | 40 | 24 |
| 7 | Participants | 90 | 68 | 22 |
| 8 | Patient individuation | 94 | 84 | 10 |
| 9= | Polarity | 98 | 90 | 8 |
| 9= | Modality | 90 | 82 | 8 |

The prominent difference between the two clause types in the first four of the ranked parameters in Table 2 points strongly to a different discourse role for the ergative as opposed to the passive. The parameters that are most distinctive for the ergative are precisely those which typically make the most contribution to the event line of the narrative. They suggest human actors





carrying out rapid, sequenced actions. These are the components which convey the essence of a narrative discourse.

A further important consideration is the absolute percentage of plus parameters for each clause type. Thus it can be seen that punctuality, which strongly differentiates ergative from passive, is nonetheless a low-ranking feature of the ergative, ranking ninth among the 10 parameters. Patient individuation, on the other hand, which constitutes a weak differentiator of passive and ergative, can be seen to be present in a high percentage of both clause types (84% for passive, 94% for ergative). The observation with regard to punctuality means simply that significant events are likely to be, but do not have to be, punctual. But the high counts for definiteness of patient in both ergative and passive call for a more detailed explanation. For although in general in narrative discourse we may expect to find a fairly high proportion of definite/referential NPs, these tend to be distributed in the discourse in such a way that event-centered, "foregrounded" parts of the narrative have significantly more than the slower, "backgrounded" parts (Hopper and Thompson, 1980:287–292). In order to explain the high figures for definite/referential patients in both ergative and passive, and the low value for the differential between the two, I turn now to a third major clause type, the active.

### *4.1. The Active*

The active is characterized by the prefix *meng-* on the verb (with some simple phonological changes); a small group of verbs, including *pergi* 'go' and *makan* 'eat', do not take the prefix. The word order is typically Agent–Verb–Patient.

The active is often used in discourse to suggest a slowed tempo of narrative, and is thus usual in backgrounded detail when scenic or characterological description is being given. It may also be used for events, especially introductory events in an episode. It is therefore often found in alternation with ergative and the event-making clitic *-lah,* as in the following:

*sa-bermula maka ada- lah kira-kira enam tujuh belas bulan*
now and happen LAH about six seven teen months
*lama- nya maka Tuan Thomsen pun datang- lah pula ka- Malaka. Ia*
time its then Mr. PUN came LAH again to Malacca he
*mengatakan isteri- nya itu sudah mati di- laut, ada kira-kira*
MENG say wife his the ASPECT die at sea was about
*empat lima hari akan sampai ka- negeri England.*
four five days before arrive in country
'And now it came about that after sixteen or seventeen months Mr.

Thomsen came back to Malacca. He said that his wife had died at sea, some four or five days before reaching England.' (125)

In a very typical use of the active, we find foregrounded clauses like *datang-lah* 'came' alternating with the *meng-* verb *mengatakan* 'say, tell' (stem form *katakan*), in which the action is an interpolation. The *meng-* verb is frequently found in positions which would be identified in some other languages as subordinate clauses, for example:

*merika'itu berkirim surat ka- Benggala meminta tolong*
they send letter to Bengal MENG ask help
'They sent a letter to Calcutta asking assistance.' (137)

The distinction "main clause–subordinate clause" is not easy to make in Malay. There appear to be no cogent reasons for distinguishing them from full sentences on the one hand or (as here) the second verb in a clause having two verbs. The appropriate way of looking at *meng-* clauses in such contexts is to view them as sharing a global function of 'backgrounding', of which 'subordination' is merely one manifestation.

It should be added here that the triple contrast passive–ergative–active does not exhaust the complexities of Malay discourse. Further variously affixed verb forms occur as well, and also the bare unaffixed stem of the verb. The account given in the present study thus falls short of a complete analysis. Yet the three clause types account for a major part of the corpus, and the data given and discussed here point to consistent conclusions.

### 4.2. *Transitivity and the* Meng- *Active*

The Transitivity counts for clauses whose verb has the prefix *meng-* is consistent with the hypothesized backgrounding function of the construction. The average count for 50 clauses on randomly chosen pages of the corpus is given in Table 3, which compares the figure obtained with the figures for passive and ergative clauses. The figure for the *meng-* active, it can be seen, is very close to that of the passive. It contrasts with the figure for ergative clauses, and suggests that in terms of global function the active is grouped with the passive.

TABLE 3
*Average Transitivity Count for 50-clause Sample of Each Major Clause Type*

| | PASSIVE | ERGATIVE | ACTIVE (*meng-*) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Average transitivity count | 4.78 | 8.62 | 5.26 |





TABLE 4
*Percentages of Passive, Ergative, and Active Clauses with Plus for Each of the Transitivity Parameters*

| PARAMETER | PASSIVE | ERGATIVE | ACTIVE (*meng-*) |
|---|---|---|---|
| A. Participants | 68 | 90 | 74 |
| B. Aspect | 48 | 88 | 50 |
| C. Affected patient | 40 | 64 | 28 |
| D. Kinesis | 42 | 84 | 26 |
| E. Polarity | 90 | 98 | 98 |
| F. Modality | 82 | 90 | 38 |
| G. Agent potency | 48 | 88 | 90 |
| H. Patient individuation | 84 | 94 | 22 |
| I. Volitionality | 60 | 88 | 62 |
| J. Punctuality | 28 | 70 | 24 |

In a previous section we compared the differences between clause types for each of the Transitivity parameters, noting which parameters are most strongly marked as differentiators between the two constructions. The same procedure may now be applied to the active, comparing it with both of the other two clause types. Table 4 gives the percentage of plus scores for each parameter for the 50-clause sample, and displays this information beside the information already given in Table 1, and Table 5 gives the ranking for the 10 parameters in the case of active clauses. Finally, Table 6 gives the differential scores for the three pairs: passive–active; ergative–active; and ergative–passive. The members of each pair are ordered as in the table title; therefore, in cases where the second member of the pair outranks the first, the score is displayed with a minus sign in front of it. Thus, a score of –6 for

TABLE 5
*Ranking of Transitivity Parameters in Sample of 50 Clauses Containing* Meng- *Active*

| RANK | PARAMETER | PERCENTAGE PLUS |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Polarity | 98 |
| 2 | Agent potency | 90 |
| 3 | Participants | 74 |
| 4 | Volitionality | 62 |
| 5 | Aspect | 50 |
| 6 | Modality | 38 |
| 7 | Affected patient | 28 |
| 8 | Kinesis | 26 |
| 9 | Punctuality | 24 |
| 10 | Patient Individuation | 22 |

TABLE 6
*Differential Scores for Transitivity Parameters between Passive–Active, Ergative–Active, and Ergative–Passive*[a]

| | PARAMETER | PASSIVE–ACTIVE | ERGATIVE–ACTIVE | ERGATIVE–PASSIVE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. | Participants | −6 | 16 | 22 |
| B. | Aspect | −2 | 38 | 40 |
| C. | Affected patient | 12 | 36 | 24 |
| D. | Kinesis | 16 | 58 | 42 |
| E. | Polarity | −8 | 0 | 8 |
| F. | Modality | 45 | 52 | 8 |
| G. | Agent potency | −42 | −2 | 40 |
| H. | Patient individuation | 62 | 72 | 10 |
| I. | Volitionality | −2 | 26 | 28 |
| J. | Punctuality | 4 | 46 | 42 |

[a] The numbers are obtained from Table 4 by subtracting the second member of the pair from the first; a minus figure indicates that the figure for the second member was higher than the figure for the first member of the pair.

the participants parameter in the Passive–Active column means that 6% more active clauses than passive clauses had two participants.

### 4.3. *Discussion*

The figures presented in Tables 4–6 point to some significant facts about the distribution of labor among the three major clauses types. Considering Table 6, which shows the differences between each pair of clause types in the percentage of transitivity parameters marked plus in the samples, we may note that a small number means that the members of the pair are functionally similar, whereas a large number suggests that that parameter is a significant selector for the clause type(s) in question. Thus we note that the parameter of polarity — the affirmative or negative value of a clause — is virtually irrelevant to differentiating clause types. On the other hand, kinesis significantly distinguishes the ergative from the active (58% difference) and from the passive (42% difference), although it does not distinguish active from passive (16% difference).

The active is most sharply distinguished from the passive and the ergative in the two parameters modality (45% and 52%) and patient individuation (62% and 72%). For each of these scores we can see from Table 4 that the *meng-* active is the lower in transitivity in each pair passive–active and ergative–active. The low score in the modality parameter can be explained from the fact that the *meng-* prefix, because of its backgrounding function, is very frequently found on complement and other dependent verbs.





The high differentiation of the active in the scores for patient individuation (i.e., definiteness of patient) suggests an answer to the question posed earlier concerning the unexpectedly low differentiation between the ergative and the passive in this parameter. Definiteness of patient is clearly an important selector for both passive and ergative. Conversely, we might expect that nonindividuated patients would tend to be found with *meng-* active verbs. This is in fact repeatedly the case, for example:

*maka masing-masing memegang pedang*
and each-one MENG draw sword
'then each of them drew his sword' (134)
*maka ia memberi hormat*
then he MENG give honor
'then he paid his respects' (138)
*maka hari itu juga ia memberi wakil ka-pada Kapitan Da'ud*
and day that also he MENG give command to Captain
'And that day also he handed over command to Captain Da'ud.' (137)

In all of these, and many other, examples of *meng-* active clauses the patient is not modified by a determiner, and is therefore considered nonindividuated. The patient in such cases is a generic or cognate object which does not REFER to a specific member of its semantic class. It should be emphasized that *meng-* on the verb does not signal or code the presence of an indefinite agent. If this were so, the phenomenon would be explicable at the local level through straightforward semantic interpretation of the morphosyntactic construction. What happens is more subtle: A "conspiracy" of discourse factors, of which the degree of referentiality of the participants is among the most important, results in a certain arrangement of the elements of the clause, accompanied by certain morphosyntactic side effects. Ignoring for the moment the strictly morphological side effects (affixation and cliticization), and considering only the word order of the main elements, verb, agent, and patient, we find that each of the three construction types selects one of these elements for clause-initial position.

1. The ERGATIVE selects the verb. Exceptions to this rule are the following: (*a*) NPs that are marked as revived topics by the enclitic particle *pun* or by a right-floated quantifier such as *semua-nya* 'all of them', and (*b*) the proclitic first person agent *ku-*, which is morphologically bound to the prefix position. In the case of the NP-*pun* construction and the type in which a referent is first mentioned and then taken up with *semua-nya,* as in:

   *dan bunga chandana semua-nya di-bahagikan*
   and flower sandalwood all-of-them be-distributed
   'and the sandalwood blossoms were all passed around' (20)

it can be seen that the effect of the quantifier and of *pun* is to ISOLATE THE REVIVED TOPIC FROM THE VERB, so that the clause is effectively verb initial. A right-floated quantifier can isolate the topic NP in this way because it is a highly continuous element; its referent has in fact just been mentioned (i.e., *bunga chandana* 'sandalwood blossoms'). The "oldness" of the quantifier thus neutralizes the "newness" of the NP and permits it to be treated as detached from the clause as a whole.

2. The ACTIVE with *meng-* is, to put it imprecisely, an agent-oriented construction. It permits the agent NP (full noun or independent pronoun) to precede the verb.
3. Finally, the PASSIVE, which shares the morphology of the ergative, is "patient oriented," and permits the patient NP to precede the verb.

These three position characteristics correspond exactly to the discourse functions that they perform, as shown by the Transitivity features that are most prominently associated with them and by the more general features of their discourse contexts.

1. The initial verb—that is, the ergative–narrates sequenced events which pertain to the main line of the discourse. It is NONPREDICATIONAL, in the sense that neither of the participant NPs constitutes a starting point for the clause; the clause does not "say something about" one of the NPs, but instead focuses purely on the event—the change—itself. The ergative scores high on all the transitivity parameters, but especially on the ones most characteristic of events: telicity (goal directedness), agency, kinesis (change), and punctuality (quickness).

2. The initial patient—that is, the passive—is a PREDICATIONAL clause type with topic–comment structure. Its starting point is the patient NP, and the nature of the agent is relatively unimportant to the intention of the clause. The passive "says something about" the patient. The passive thus scores low on all the parameters involving the agent—number of participants, agent potency, and volitionality—and scores high on the parameter of patient individuation.

3. The initial agent—that is, the active—is also a predicational clause type. Its topic is the agent, and its patient is often less relevant to the context. The active "says something about" the agent. It is therefore high in the agent parameter of agent potency, and low in the patient parameters of patient affectedness, patient individuation, and number of participants. The active is also low in volitionality, perhaps because of its affinity, which it shares with the passive, for nonevent, backgrounded contexts.

The obvious mirror image relationship between the active and the passive suggests, as Talmy Givón has pointed out to me, that the active should be





considered an antipassive. In functional terms this is certainly the correct way to view the *meng-* active; yet, as Verhaar observes (making the same point independently of both Givón and myself), the term "antipassive" is generally used for the construction with an oblique patient (Verhaar, 1982). In the variety of Malay under investigation here, it may be important that the affected patient of the ergative often has the "preposition" *akan* with it (see Section 2.1); if this "preposition" is viewed as a marker of the direct (i.e., accusative) case, then its absence might be taken as an indication of obliqueness, and the case for the antipassive interpretation of the *meng-* "active" would be complete.

### *4.4. Event as Verb Focusing*

The characterization of the verb-initial clause type as eventive is supported by the distribution of the enclitic discourse particle *-lah,* which I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Hopper, 1979a, 1979c). This particle is not restricted to verbs, but serves to single out any major element of the clause. In the following passage, for example, the pronoun *aku* is in focus:

*maka sampai- lah ka- tempat aku menulis, maka undur- lah aku*
then came LAH to place I write and shrink-back LAH I
*karna di-antara juru-tulis itu semua-nya aku- lah sa'orang*
because among scribes the all-of-them I LAH one-person
*yang terkechil, ya'ani muda*
the smallest indeed youngest
'Then he came to the desk where I was writing, and I shrank back, for among all the scribes it was I who was the smallest and youngest.' (82)

The addition of *-lah* to a NP invariably focuses that element in much the same way as the cleft sentence construction does in English (a parallel I have suggested in the translation). The use of the same particle with a verb results in the foregrounding of the entire clause, as is illustrated by the two other examples of *-lah* (*sampai-lah* 'he came', *undur-lah* 'shrank back') in the same passage. The particle *-lah* can be added to both transitive and intransitive verbs; with intransitives it is the usual way of expressing foregrounding, while with transitives it denotes some special focus on the event, giving it the sense of a "pivotal" happening.[3]

[3] It is striking that an exactly parallel use of a discourse particle is found in Cajonos Zapotec (Jones and Nellis, 1979). In this language, the particle *na'a,* when following a noun phrase, serves to bring the participant into focus, and, when following a verb, singles out the event as of special significance to the development of the discourse.

### 4.5. *Word Order and Discourse Function*

The three clause types discussed in this paper can be grouped in two ways, with different perspectives:

1. From the perspective of MORPHOLOGY, the passive and the ergative are grouped together by reason of the prefix *di-* and other trappings of "passive" morphology described earlier.
2. From the perspective of WORD ORDER, the passive is grouped with the active (*meng-*). In these two constructions it is normally the case that a NP immediately precedes the verb.

The discourse functions which correlate with these structural groupings have already been discussed. Passive and ergative have in common a strong tendency toward association with a referential patient. Passive and active share a propensity toward backgrounding of the event (state, description, etc.). Figures 1 and 2 suggest a schematization of the two groupings.

The function that is common to active and passive is essentially a global, discourse one. Backgrounding is essentially definable in terms of the discourse as a whole, rather than in terms of local clausal semantics. By contrast, the feature shared by passive and ergative—definiteness of patient—is a local, semantic one. The discourse function of backgrounding is a complex one, not reducible to a single semantic parameter, but sharing several Transitivity parameters. These parameters conspire to produce an effect of slower action, and hence a lessened intensity of change. It seems significant that the broader, global, functions of foregrounding and back-

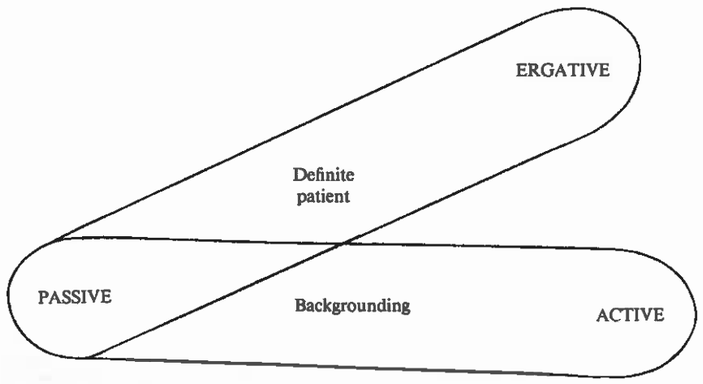


FIGURE 1. Functional grouping of the three major clause types.





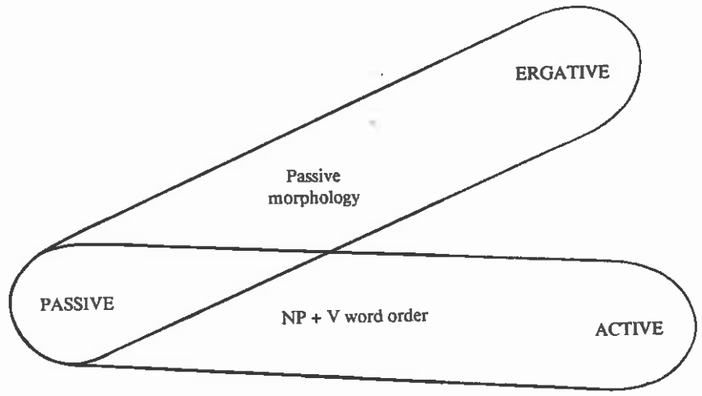


FIGURE 2. Structural grouping of the three major clause types.

grounding should be signaled by the less rigidly grammaticized, looser, device of word order, while the more restricted, local, function of definite patient should be signaled by the tighter, grammaticized, device of verb affixation. One might predict that this correlation (global discourse function—word order or other less grammaticized structure; local semantic structure—more rigidly grammaticized device) would represent a strong "iconic" tendency in human languages, if not a universal.

Finally, the fact that in the two backgrounding constructions a NP precedes the verb (agent in the *meng-* active; patient in the passive), whereas in the foregrounding construction (the ergative) the verb is initial, is also no coincidence: Narrative prose in Old English and Old Icelandic shows a precise parallel. In the Old Icelandic sagas, for example, verb-initial syntax is characteristic of a rapid tempo of narration, with events occurring in swift succession, usually in a series with the same actor, while subject–verb clauses—just as in Malay—slow down the tempo and serve to report background descriptions, explanations, and interpolations.[4] Both the Malay and the Icelandic styles use the positioning of a NP before the verb as a device for arresting the flow of the discourse and holding up the action by momentarily focusing attention away from ACTIONS to PARTICIPANTS, away from the dynamic HAPPENINGS to the THINGS (people and props) involved in those happenings. Languages such as Malay and Old Icelandic,

[4] See Heusler, 1967:170–171. The initial verb in Old Icelandic is characterized by Heusler as *bewegte Stellung* 'lively position', the post-subject verb as *Ruhestellung* 'rest position' (see also Hopper, 1975:51–52, 1979c:48–56).

in which subject–verb and verb–subject word order are in pragmatic alternation (SV–VS languages) might be expected to show just this kind of iconicity in their discourse grammar.

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PART II

# Entities in Discourse