

STUDIES IN AUSTRONESIAN LINGUISTICS

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Monographs in International Studies  
Southeast Asia Series Number 76

Athens, Ohio 1988

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### Chapter 15

#### HOW ERGATIVE IS MALAY?

Paul J. Hopper

#### I. Introduction

Ergativity in Western Austronesian, at least in recent American linguistics, has been studied from the outset as a discourse, rather than as a sentence level phenomenon (Hopper 1977, 1979a, 1979b; Rafferty 1982; Hopper 1983), and was in a sense stumbled across rather than posited initially. It is therefore not surprising that there should be some hesitation in referring to certain varieties of Malay and Indonesian as "ergative languages." This hesitation receives some support from the fact that speakers of these languages, when asked to translate isolated transitive sentences containing an Agent, a patient, and a Transitive Verb, do not immediately present them in an ergative form. In what sense, then, can the Malay of certain documents appropriately be described as "ergative"? In this paper, I discuss the "local" (for this term, see Hopper 1983) correlates of case marking in Malay, and refer the phenomena discussed to Du Bois' notion of Preferred Argument Structure (Du Bois 1985). I conclude that ergativity in Malay is an epiphenomenon of a certain natural distribution of verbs, nouns, and clitics in discourse.

#### II. Data.

My data come from the autobiography of Munshi Abdullah (Abdullah 1932), supplemented in one or two instances by Abdullah's Voyage (Abdullah 1928). Abdullah died in 1856.

The texts are not without their problems as literary and cultural documents. Abdullah was not an ethnic Malay (although Malay was certainly his first language), and his autobiography displays an irritating bias toward the developing British hegemony which suggests that his assumed reading public was primarily a European one. Yet they have certain advantages as linguistic documents, including their length, wealth of concrete incident, homogeneity of authorship, and a relative closeness to vernacular Malay which one does not find in the more elevated traditional texts. The circumstances of his age, we should

remember, were not favorable to a Malay-speaking man from the lower classes both achieving literacy and writing creatively about his own life and the events of his time, and this phenomenon could only have arisen through a peculiar combination of personal background and historical movements. For brevity's sake I shall refer to the language of these documents as "Malay." I shall also assume that it authentically reflects in writing some variety of Malay spoken in the Malay Peninsula during the early 19th century.

### III. Noun-Verb Constructions in Malay.

Three constructions are singled out here for analysis in local terms.

(1) The Passive. The passive has the morphology usually associated with the Malay passive: pronoun agents appear as oleh. Third person agents, whether noun, pronoun, or unspecified, are always indicated in the stem with the prefix di, and the patient is prepended to the verb complex. Some examples are given in (1):

(1) (a) *ada pun apit China itu di-perbuat daripada rotan sega*  
was PUN press Chinese the Pass:make out-of rattan best  
"Now the Chinese press was made out of finest rattan" (18)

(b) *dan tiada pula engkau di-hinakan orang*  
and not also you Pass:scorn people  
"Moreover people will not scorn you." (17)

This is the passive of the present-day school grammars and of function as modern western-style passives. It is the canonical passive, characterized typically by suppression of agent, thematicity of patient, and in general by de-transitivization. In discourse the Passive is commonly found when objects are being described, such as artifacts, and it invariably communicates a state or generic situation. There may be an agent, but frequently the agent is unspecified.

(11) The Ergative. Morphologically the ergative is similar to the Passive. For this reason, in the examples below the morphological trappings of the ergative are glossed the same way as those of the passive, i.e. with the notation PASS. There are, however, some distinctions. The patient in the ergative construction is sometimes preceded by the accusative preposition *akan*; this is especially often the case if the patient is referential. Furthermore, ergative clauses are verb-initial, so that, ignoring clitics, the ergative is Verb-Noun and the passive Noun-Verb (see Hopper 1983, as well as the discussion below).

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Unlike the passive agent, the ergative agent is never generic, and is almost invariably definite. Some examples of ergatives are given below:

(2) (a) *maka di-unjukkan-nya satu ringgit di-tangan-ku*  
and PASS:put 3AGT one dollar in-hand-my  
"and he put a dollar into my hand" (29)

(b) *maka di-keluarkan-nya Korsaan*  
and PASS:take out 3AGT  
"and he took out a Koran" (88)

(c) *sa-telah di-lihat oleh Tuan Rafles akan dia*  
after PASS:see "by" Mr. Rafles OBJ. him  
"as soon as Mr. Rafles saw him" (85)

Here, as typically in ergative clauses, foregrounded events of the narrative are reported (cf. Hopper 1979a), that is, events which are on the main line of the narrative, involving the participants of the discourse in concrete actions. In a cluster of such ergative clauses the events occur in sequence and usually one of them, the most prominent, is marked with the enclitic particle *lah*.

(11) The Active. The active is characterized by the verbal prefix *me(ng)* (in one of its several allomorphs) and a subject, which is an agent if the verb is eventive. The verb may be transitive (in the traditional sense) or intransitive. If it is intransitive, then the active may communicate an event, in which case the agent follows the verb, and the verb has the eventive particle *-lah*, as in (3a).

(3) (a) *maka meletup-lah ubat bedil itu*  
and ACT:explode-LAH gunpowder the  
"and the gunpowder exploded" (43)

If the verb is transitive, it seems always to communicate a state, description, complex of simultaneous occurrences, or a subordinate event. In (3b), the clause with an active verb is an example of a description:

(b) *dan lagi banyak ia menaruh kasih an akan orang*  
and also greatly he ACT:hold love for people  
"Moreover, he held people in great affection" (59)

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#### IV. Possible Clause and Sentence Level Explanations.

The existence of these three possibilities for transitive clauses raises the question of their differential functions. From the point of view of recent linguistic studies, we might consider several possible explanations. The ones which I will discuss here are: dedication to a particular distribution of grammatical relations; definiteness/referentiality of the NP's; word order; and control of agreement.

##### IV.a. Grammatical Relations.

An ideal and exhaustive explanation compatible with recent work on Relational Grammar might run as follows: The passive, with its preposed patient, distributes GR's so that the patient has derived subject properties and the agent is "en chomage". The ergative, with its VSO word order, has subject properties residing in the agent. The status of the active would then be somewhat problematical, but it would perhaps involve demotion of the agent to absolutive status in order to secure eligibility for certain equi-case rules such as deletions.

##### IV.b. The Reflexive.

The actual evidence for such a redistribution is contradictory. In one construction, the reflexive, the hypothesis is supported. We find, as we would expect, that in the ergative and the active, but not the passive, the agent can trigger reflexivization:

(4) (a) maka ku-matikan-lah diri-ku  
and PASS.1AGT:kill-LAH myself

"I killed myself"(i.e., "I died a thousand deaths")(115)

(b) maka di-buat-nya diri-nya bisu  
and PASS:make-3AGT himself dumb

"and he made himself out to be dumb" (232)

(c) masing-masing hendak membesar-kan diri-nya  
each-one wish ACT:aggrandise himself

"each one wishes to aggrandise himself" (139)

(d) hingga raja memasukkan diri-nya dalam pekerjaan itu  
until king ACT:insert himself into affair the

"until the king inserts himself into the affair"(Kesah 19)

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The reflexive construction, then, suggests that for both ergative and active the agent may be an initial subject and hence may trigger reflexivization. The absence of the reflexive in passives is accounted for by the general absence of reflexive pronouns in subject position in the sentence (apparently universal wherever an identifiable passive construction exists).

##### IV.c. Relative Clause Formation.

Malay, of course, adheres strictly to the general Western Austronesian constraint against non-subject relative clauses. Before a Patient can be relativized, it must first be made into a passive subject, as in the following example:

(5) Kechi yang di-bawa oleh Tengku Penglima Besar sudah datang  
ketch which PASS:take "by" <title> already come

"The ketch which the Penglima Besar took has arrived" (74)

But what if the Agent is relativized? If Malay is truly ergative, we might expect an ergative agent to appear as the relativized NP in the lower clause.

At this point we encounter the problems of the discourse functions of various constructions. Malay does not in fact permit ergative agents to be relativized (a feature in which Malay resembles other well-described ergative languages, such as Dyirbal and the Mayan languages). However, this does not mean that ergative agents do not count as subjects, but only that the ergative may not appear in the discourse contexts characteristic of relative clauses. Such clauses do not assert new, concrete events in the discourse, but rather they define the terms and provide supporting information for the main points of the discourse. It is thus not surprising that ergatives do not appear in relative clauses, not in any truly subordinate clause.

We do find ergatives in clauses which translate into English as subordinate, such as those introduced by *apabila* "when." Such clauses are, however, not so much subordinated as (to use a term suggested by Benji Waid) "downshifted," that is, eventive and immediately preceding a more important event, as in:

(6) Shahadan apabila di-dengar oleh Tuan Rafles akan segala  
now when PASS:hear "by" Mr. <name> OBJ all  
halahwal itu affair that

"Now when Mr. Rafles heard about this whole matter" (89)

In background clauses transitive relationships are expressed either by the active or the passive; it follows that relative clauses formed on agents are in the active, never the ergative. In general it looks as though the supposed constraints on

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relativization in Austronesian are tied so closely to discourse functions that their sentence-level correlates are suspect of being secondary to more general facts.

#### IV.d. Equi-NP Deletion.

One possible test for "ergativity" is to see whether the subordinate agent can trigger deletion of a co-referential NP in a frequently in texts. The following examples involve the verb *begin*. With *mulai*, the embedded clause must necessarily have the same agent as the higher clause, and therefore if the agent triggering the deletion of the lower agent. It can then be argued that the ergative agent in such sentences is a "subject".

(7) (a) *maka...di-mulai-nya membaiki segala jambatan di-Singapura*  
and *PASS:begin-3AGT ACT:repair all piers in <name>*

"and he began to repair all the piers in Singapore" (267)

(b) *hata maka ku-mulai* *menyalin kitab itu*  
now then *PASS.1AGT:begin ACT:copy book the*

"So I began to copy out the book" (126)

In the less tightly controlled situation in which two clauses sharing a participant are coordinated, ergative control of Equi is also found:

(8) *maka ku-tinggalkan-lah pekerjaan yang di-Singapura lalu*  
and *PASS.1AGT-leave-LAH job* *which in Singapore then*

*pergi-lah ka Malaka*  
*go-LAH to Malaka*

"and I left my job in Singapore and went to Malacca" (251)

It is noticeable that in (8) the deleted NP is not an ergative, since the verb of the coordinated clause is intransitive; this situation is thus different from that which has been described for ergative languages like Dyirbal, in which the deleted NP must have the same case as the trigger. Indeed Malay is indifferent to syntactic cases provided there is pragmatic recoverability; thus in the next two examples the common absolutive triggers deletion:

(9) *maka kedua mereka-itu pun di-ambill-nya-lah akan menjadi*  
and both they *PUN PASS:take-3AGT-LAH to ACT:become*

*Juru-tulis*  
*secretary*

"And he took both of them to become secretaries" (58)

It would of course be semantically unlikely in (9) that *Juru-tulis* would refer to the agent *nya* of the verb *ambil*. What is at work here is clearly some looser, pragmatic principle of "ease of recoverability" rather than strictly syntactic rules. In applying this principle, word order is, as might be expected, far more significant a criterion than case marking, and there is thus a strong tendency for the first-mentioned NP to be understood as the controller.

#### IV.e. Possessor Reference.

A final possibility for a construction in which the ergative agent has subject properties is in the reflexive possessor, exemplified below. Unfortunately there are so few examples of this construction in the text that it is not possible to tell if anything more is involved here than pragmatic reference:

(10) *lalu di-bawa-nya akan Tuan Farquhar ka-rumah-nya*  
then *PASS:take-3AGT OBJ Mr. F.* *to-house-his*

"then he<sub>i</sub> took Mr. Farquhar to his<sub>i</sub> house" (138)

#### V. Some Preliminary Conclusions.

I would sum up by suggesting that the evidence for ergativity from "subject tests" is inconclusive, with some slight evidence for distinguishing passive from ergative at the clause level, but no real assurance that these criteria are not ultimately pragmatic, discourse criteria. The greatest degree of grammaticization of subject properties of the agent is, not surprisingly, found in single clauses, such as the reflexive, and does not strongly extend itself into neighboring clauses. The resemblance to that of the tightly rhetoricized literary texts of European languages, with their close syntactic governance and cyclic principles of sentence formation. It is instead paracoordinate found in Western languages, with the common history of classical rhetoric, there corresponds to a large extent the discourse organizational principle of foreground and background.

## VI. Definiteness-Referentiality.

Another area in which we might seek the essential functions of ergative, active, and passive is that of the definiteness of the NP arguments.

Historically speaking this seems promising, since surely the *di* and *menj* forms of the verb date from at least a period of common Western Austronesian. The passive prefix *di* reflects functionally the well-documented Old Malay prefix *ni*, which in turn has cognates throughout Western Austronesian in a prefix or infix \**ni/ni* (cf. Hopper 1979b:147-148). The phonological change *ni>di* has an exact counterpart in the parallel change of *mar->bar->ber-*. The often cited (cf. most recently Shibatani 1985:845-846) connection between *di* and 3rd person Pronoun *dia* must be abandoned, together with all conclusions about "passives" based on it.

Now "definiteness" has often been viewed as the basis for the selection of the Philippine Object Focus constructions involving this same morpheme. The *di* form of the verb might then be specialized for definite, topic-potential NP Objects, while the *menj* form of the verb was reserved for clauses in which the Object is indefinite, and the ergative/passive distinction would reside purely in the word order (Verb-Patient vs. Patient-Verb). With this hypothesis in mind, I will consider each of the three constructions in turn.

### VI.a. The Passive.

With the passive the patient must indeed be definite, and the agent may be unspecified, indefinite, or definite. When the passive is agentless, which occurs quite commonly, the patient is of course the only candidate for topicality.

### VI.b. The Ergative.

There is a strong tendency for the patient to be definite, and for the agent also to be definite. The "canonical" ergative communicates a known agent doing something to a known patient. Yet there are some puzzling exceptions to this. The verb *tembak* "to fire" occurs frequently in Abdullah's autobiography: pirates fire on ships, naval vessels fire their cannon in salute to visiting dignitaries, and so on. More often than not the verb is in the form *di-tembak*, as in:

- (11) kemudian *di-tembak* dari kapal beberapa kali  
 then PASS:fire from ship several times  
 "then several shots were fired from the ship"  
 (literally, "then was fired from the ship several times")  
 (158)

Here, as often, there is no real evidence that the cannon themselves are in the registry of the discourse. Are they perhaps there implicitly? That the unspecified patient of *tembak* is either a weapon or a victim, but never a projectile, is indisputable, and conceivably because ships always have guns, the mere mention of a ship is enough to introduce the idea "gun" into the immediate registry. In the following, *bacha-bacha* "say a spell" can hardly be transitive, and therefore should not have an ergative at all, while *tiupkan* "blow upon" is transitive, but does not have an easily identifiable patient in the discourse:

- (12) *maka di-bacha-bacha-nya, maka di-tiupkan-nya*  
 and PASS:say-spell-3AGT and PASS:blow/upon-3AGT  
*tiga kali, maka berjalan ia ka-haluan*  
 three times and walk he to bow  
 "he said an incantation, blew three times, and then went forward" (99)

Such constructions are known in earlier Malay works also; for example, in his anthology *Bunga Rantai Melayu* King, Emeis (1960) discusses the following clause from the traditional narrative *Hikayat Hang Tuah*:

- (13) *maka oleh ibu bapa-nya di-tangis-nya*  
 and "by" parents-his PASS:weep-3AGT  
 "and his parents wept"

Emeis rightly rejects the amended reading in which the verb *tangis* has the transitivizing suffix *-i*, that is, *tangisi* "mourn, weep over", and suggests that the construction may be of an old type.

"Intransitive ergatives" of this type typically denote punctual or kinetic events. They show, of course, the extreme case of non-specific patients, the absence of a patient altogether.

### VI.c. The Active.

Although the active has a certain predilection for indefinite patients, there are plenty of counterexamples. It will be recalled that the active is not restricted to transitive clauses, and therefore quite a number of actives occur in the same discourse contexts as ergatives. Often enough the Patient of the active is generic or in some other sense not a true participant of the discourse, e.g.:

(14) *maka masing-masing memegang pedang*  
 and each-one ACT:draw sword

"and each one drew his sword" (134)

Such phrases often translate into English as definite ("his sword"), but of course this is an artifact of the translation; fully differentiated from its verb. Expressions like *menerima kaseh* "say thanks", and *memberi hormat* "pay respects" are invariably in the active. But cases are not wanting in which even in unambiguously main clauses the object is specified, e.g.:

(15) *ia melarikan kuda-nya sampai ka-pada Bukit Serindit*  
 he ACT:ride horse-his as:far:as to hill Serindit  
 "he would ride his horse as far as Serindit Hill" (53)

In this instance a sequence of actions leading up to the protagonist being attacked by a tiger is being reported. Marginally the actions can be said to be backgrounded, and hence the verb is in the *meng* form, but the Patient (the horse) is definite and referential, and is certainly a participant, since the horse saves his life. Still, the horse is new to the discourse, and owes its referentiality purely to the general presence of horses in this textual registry.

It must be concluded that the semantic parameters revolving around the idea of definiteness and referentiality are not sufficient to account for the three construction types under consideration here.

VII. Word Order.

It is significant that the three constructions share two word order types: active and passive have Noun-Verb, and ergative has, typically, Verb-Noun. In an earlier paper (Hopper 1983) I noted that the Verb-Noun pattern is "more transitive" than the two Noun-Verb patterns, in the sense of possessing an average, a considerably higher proportion of the transitivity parameters explicated in Hopper and Thompson (1980). On a scale of zero to ten, in which each point marks an individual transitivity parameter such as "Punctuality," "Volitionality," "Kinesis" and so on, the Verb-initial clause averaged 4.48 and 5.26 respectively (Hopper 1983:80). The Verb-initial clause is also foregrounded in the sense mentioned previously. Noun-initial clauses weaken the intensity of the discourse, and slow down the action by focusing attention on the participants rather than the things happening. Active and passive represent strategies for achieving this backgrounding effect by bringing, respectively, a lexical Agent or a lexical Patient into the topic position (Hopper 1983: 83-84).

VIII. Preferred Argument Structure.

Some recent work by Du Bois (1985) and Lambrecht (forthcoming) allows a fascinating perspective on this distribution. Du Bois has shown that languages have what he refers to as a Preferred Argument Structure, a clause type which occurs more often than other clause types. The vast majority of clauses in any discourse have at the most one lexical (i.e., full noun) participant. This noun, which is relatively new to the discourse (otherwise it would be coded as a clitic or a simple agreement marker), is normally the Absolutive, i.e., the Patient if the verb is transitive and the Agent if the verb is intransitive.

Lambrecht (forthcoming) shows that in Spoken French there exists a "preferred Clause Unit" in which only the following elements may precede the verb (and form a tonal unit with the verb):

- Atonic Pronouns (je, tu, etc.);
- Demonstrative/impersonal *ça, c'*
- Dummy subject marker *il*; often omitted
- Adverbial clitic *y* there

This Preferred Clause Unit consists of the scheme Clitic~V(N). Other clause types may occur, but they do so under quite specific discourse circumstances. A lexical noun ("subject") may precede the verb under such conditions as the following:

- (i). The subject is of relatively slight importance to the discourse;
- (ii). The subject is low in anaphoricity or continuity, i.e. has not been mentioned for a while or is new;
- (iii). The subject is indefinite or generic, or in some other sense low in specificity;
- (iv). The clause is generally low in Transitivity, that is to say, its verb is frequently stative or copular;
- (v). The clause is subordinate.

These conditions are so close to those of Malay as to exclude coincidence. In Malay, too, the Preferred Clause Unit consists of a verb and clitics, with or without a lexical noun; in narrative texts such clauses account for approximately sixty percent of all clauses. Moreover, the lexical noun in such clauses, if there is one, tends strongly to be a Patient if the verb is transitive, and an Agent if the verb is intransitive.

Like French, Malay has what can now be seen as various strategies for thematizing participants while preserving the essential clause structure. A common means of accomplishing this is with the participle *pun*, which permits a lexical noun to precede the verb under discourse circumstances otherwise conducive to the

use of the Preferred Clause Unit, for example:

(16) maka kedua mereka-itu pun di-ambil-nya-lah akan  
and both they PUN PASS:take-3Agt-LAH to  
menjadi juru-tulis  
ACT:become secretary

"And he took both of them to become secretaries" (58)

I would further suggest that the "prepositions" *oleh* (Agentive) and *akan* (Objective) which occur in these texts quite frequently with NPs can be seen as markers of lexical nouns, too new to be referred to simply by anaphoric pronouns or other clitics. Since *oleh* was itself presumably once a verb ("get, obtain"), clauses with lexical nouns can be seen to be grammaticized out of combinations of smaller clauses each conforming to the Preferred Clause Unit type.

## IX. Conclusion.

To revert to the question posed at the outset, "Is Malay an Ergative language?" it can be seen now that the very terms of the question presuppose a certain way of looking at language and discourse, the "building blocks" approach which I have criticised elsewhere (Hopper 1983: 67-68). According to this view, grammatical structures at the clause and sentence level are "combined" in various ways to construct discourses, but the clause and sentence "levels" are held to have (as the term suggests) an autonomy distinct from the discourses to whose structure they contribute. It is not surprising that, from this perspective, the question of ergativity in Malay is confusing, and it is for this reason that those who, like myself, have come to reject the structuralist perspective have, while admitting that Malay has ergative constructions, hesitated to call the language "ergative" in the usual sense (see Hopper 1979a: 233). At best we can say that lexical nouns in certain types of discourse are ergatively distributed, and that in such contexts the simple clause morphology tends to reflect this distribution. In other words, as pointed out by John Verhaar (this volume), ergativity in Malay is "split", only along pragmatic rather than semantic or syntactic lines.

It should be noted, however, that this split becomes evident only because of the initial decision to consider discourse as the source of grammar rather than as the result of grammar. It is not that Malay is anomalous or "not really ergative," but only that the picture of a language which emerges when grammar is deprived of its a priori status may look somewhat different from that assembled in advance on the basis of decontextualized sentences. A textual account of one language therefore cannot readily be compared to a sentence-level account of another.

I think that there is a lesson, perhaps a profound one, in the question of ergativity in Malay. It is that there is ultimately an indeterminacy in the form-meaning relationship which admits a rather different view of speakers and their worlds from that of standard structuralism. I would suggest that we must confront this view not because otherwise we will be unable to explain ergativity in Malay, but because otherwise we will be lured into developing increasingly refined methodological tools for investigating illusory phenomena, or rather epiphenomena, derivative of the supposition of invariant form-meaning relationships. Ergativity once seemed like a relatively simple matter: a situation in which the transitive patient and the intransitive subject behaved grammatically as a class. We should now recognize in it the subtlety of such broad-based, global linguistic notions as aspect and transitivity, with which it is intimately linked in discourse and local morphosyntax.



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