

CONTROLLING FOR SUBJECTHOOD: A MALAYO-POLYNESIAN TYPOLOGY

- **Synopsis:** The talk presents a typological investigation of Austronesian pivots, and proposes that, instead of being a syntactically uniform phenomenon, they divide into three types wrt. to their subjecthood status, measured on i) the target of obligatory control, ii) A- and A'-movement properties, iii) discourse restrictions. We argue that pivothood should be understood as a continuum from topics to surface subjects, with mixed elements in-between the two poles, and that this cline results from ongoing topic-to-subject grammaticalization in Austronesian languages (cf. Patrianto & Chen 2023) via non-canonical passives (cf. Legate 2021), yielding different syntactic derivations of *voice*-marking and diverging subjecthood properties of pivots. The talk touches upon what defines subjecthood and whether it should be understood as a primitive or epiphenomenon.
- **Austronesian voice system:** Many Austronesian languages promote one argument to a syntactically and pragmatically prominent *pivot* status. The pivot moves to a high position in the clause, obtains a dedicated marker or fixed position, and is cross-referenced by special verbal morphology (*voice*-marking) which co-varies with the pivot's theta-role and/or base-generation site: **A**(gent) **V**(oice), **O**(bject)**V**(oice)/**T**(heme)**V**(oice), **C**(ircumstantial)**V**(oice), or **L**(ocative)**V**(oice). A debate in the literature concerns whether pivots correspond to clausal topics or actual subjects, alternating merely information-structure or grammatical functions (and argument-structure), respectively, as well as what kind of (case-)alignment *voice*-marking instantiates. Though previous accounts (e.g. Richards 2000; Rackowski & Richards 2005; Brodtkin & Royer 2022; Patrianto & Chen 2023) focus on A- or A'-movement properties (wrt. to binding and discourse effects) to determine the subjecthood status of pivots, we argue that these are necessary but not sufficient diagnostics of subjecthood.
- **Pivots in obligatory control:** Based on a comparative investigation of eight (Philippine- and Indonesian-type) Malayo-Polynesian languages, we employ obligatory control as a subjecthood diagnostic (cf. Dixon 1994) and link it to the independently identified A- or A'-properties, obligatory information-structural effects and the positional flexibility of non-pivot agents. The emerging correlation is: some languages strictly control the embedded agent, irrespective of pivothood (Cebuano, Madurese, Tagalog; in (1a)); pivots in these languages behave like topics, and non-pivot agents have a (relatively) flexible position in the clause. Some other languages consistently control the embedded pivot, irrespective of its theta-role (1b); these languages require the non-pivot agent to be strictly adjacent to the verb, and fall into two classes: i) such where pivots are actual subjects (with A-movement properties and no discourse restrictions; Acehnese, Indonesian, Sundanese); ii) such where pivots stand in-between topics and subjects in terms of their A/A' status (Balinese, Malagasy).

- (1) a. *Nagatubili siyang [PRO_{agent} hiramín ang pera_{pivot} sa bangko]*
 AV.hesitated he [PRO_{agent} PV-borrow PIV money_{pivot} OBL bank]
 'He hesitated to borrow the money from the bank.' Tagalog [Guilfoyle et al. 1992: 390]
- b. *nanery ny zaza [PRO_{pivot} h-ozahan' ny dokotera_{agent}] aho*
 force.AV the child [PRO_{pivot} IRR-examine.PV the doctor_{agent}] 1SG
 'I forced the child to be examined by the doctor.' Malagasy [Potsdam 2009: 761]

TABLE 1	LANGUAGE	Controllee	Discourse re- strictions	Reconstruction for Condition C	WCO	Non-pivot agent
topic	Ceb., Mad., Tag.	agent	✓	✓	×	free
topic/subject	Balinese	pivot	✓	✓	×	V-adjacent
topic/subject	Malagasy	pivot	✓	×	×	V-adjacent
subject	Ace., Ind., Sun.	pivot	×	×	×	V-adjacent

- **From topics to subjects:** We argue that the variation among pivots reflects an ongoing topic-to-subject grammaticalization, mediated by the formation of non-canonical passives. The transition proceeds as follows: the pivot landing-site is initially a topic position, dissociated from argument-licensing (akin to V2). At some point, plausibly due to its obligatory nature and the weakening of its D-linking status, the pivot is reinterpreted as subject and its landing site acquires a case-assigning function. Under TV/OV, *Voice*'s capacity to structurally case-license its internal argument may at first co-occur (e.g. Balinese), but is eventually lost. TV/OV constructions thus turn into non-canonical passives (Legate 2021): neither are they morphologically more marked nor do they demote the agent, but they can license only one argument, the pivot, which maps into the subject. The agent then has to resort to licensing via last-resort verbal adjacency (Levin 2015; Erlewine et al. 2019).
- **Diachrony and alignment:** The analysis is compatible with independent observations: (i) topic-to-subject reanalysis is a well-observed diachronic process that usually goes along with passivization (van Gelderen 2022); (ii) Indonesian-type systems (mostly found low on Table 1) show an impoverished *voice* system (contrasting only AV/OV), in which (morphologically null) OV co-occurs with a canonical passive, involving a PASS-marker plus a demoted agent. Notably, the two constructions are blurred and interchangeable: in Balinese (and

similarly in Acehnese and Indonesian), the same suffix *-a* is interpreted as 3rd.SG pronoun agent in the absence of an overt agent (2), but as passive marker when the agent is expressed as a (demoted) *by*-phrase, (3).

- (2) *Nyoman baang=a pipis* (3) *Nyoman baang-a pipis (teken Wayan)*
 Nyoman OV.give=3 money Nyoman give-PASS money (by Wayan)
 'She gave Nyoman money.' 'Nyoman was given money (by Wayan).' [Arka et al. 2008: 70]

The endpoint of Austronesian grammaticalization could be an alignment shift to ergativity. Proto-Austronesian is reconstructed as NOM-ACC, with ergativity as later innovation (Hohepa 1969; Aldridge 2021); ACC-to-ERG shift often occurs in passives and nominalizations (Polinsky 2016), the latter regarded as the original source of voice-markers (Starosta et al 1981). Verbal adjacency of non-pivot agents may indicate that Voice° lacks structural (ACC) case, as in passives, but still bears some licensing relation to its introduced argument, as in ergative systems. This could eventually yield an ERG alignment, supported by the consensus that that fully ergative Polynesian languages (e.g. Samoan, Tongan) emerged via reanalysis of passives (Chung 1978).

• **Defining subjecthood:** On a broader level, the talk addresses how subjecthood can be structurally defined. Dixon 1994 diagnoses subjects via their ability to serve as controllee, bind subject-oriented reflexives and form imperatives. We suggest that i) not all three properties always track subjecthood, and ii) while A-properties and structural height might be necessary preconditions for subjecthood, they are not sufficient criteria. For instance, in Tagalog, pivots A-move above all other arguments, but still do not acquire subject status. Similarly, in non-Austronesian syntactically ergative (SE) languages, the ABS object A-moves across the ERG agent (Bittner & Hale 1996; Coon et al. 2021), but still the agent remains the subject. We therefore do not synchronically treat OV/TV in subject-pivot languages as SE; the resemblance is only apparent: in both cases, the theme A-moves across a core agent, but only in Austronesian OV/TV does the logical object map into the surface subject. Following Ershova (2019); Bobaljik (2024), we claim that the subjecthood function is assigned to the highest argument within the Voice° domain (base-generated or derived), and only VoiceP-internal re-ordering may re-distribute grammatical roles. We assume that Austronesian pivots A-move to a high clausal position via the edge of VoiceP (Aldridge 2004; Brodtkin 2022); languages then differ in whether this intermediate step lands i) below the thematic site of the agent (cf. object shift) or ii) above it (cf. non-canonical passive); only the latter process can alter grammatical roles and derive a new subject (languages in middle/bottom of table). Evidence comes from Tagalog: exceptionally, when the verb appears in the non-volitive form (entailing telicity and reduced agentivity; Dell 1983), control must target the pivot, even if it is not the agent (4), and a theme pivot may license a reflexive agent. Strikingly, Travis 2000 argues that in non-volitive forms, the agent is base-generated in a functional projection lower than Voice°; since an internal argument pivot still moves to the edge of Voice°, it c-commands the *in-situ* agent within the argument domain and thus becomes the surface subject.

- (4) *in-utus-an ko si=Maria=ng [ma-halik-an ni=Pedro_{agent} PRO_{pivot}]*
 PRF-order-TV 1SG.GEN PIV=Maria=C [NONVOL-kiss-TV GEN=Pedro_{agent} PRO_{pivot}]
 'I ordered Maria to (allow herself) to be kissed by Pedro.' Tagalog [Kroeger 1993: 95]

• **Primitive or epiphenomenon:** The core of our talk is the question of whether subjecthood is a universal primitive or merely a bundle of properties that typically (but not always) happen to converge on one argument. We suggest that Austronesian languages *do* exhibit a single structural subject: in languages high on the table, the agent remains the subject, while in middle/bottom languages, the pivot becomes the surface subject. This assumption is challenged by the fact that, in the latter languages, Dixon's subjecthood criteria split among two arguments: e.g. in Malagasy, control targets the pivot, (1b), but imperatives can only address the agent, (5)-(6).

- (5) *didi-o ny akoho_{pivot}* (6) **didion-dRakoto_{agent} ianao_{pivot}*
 cut.TV.IMP DET chicken_{pivot} cut.TV.IMP-Rakoto.GEN_{agent} you_{pivot}
 'Cut the chicken.' [Koopman 2005: 143] Int.: 'Get cut by Rakoto!' [Koopman 2005: 143]

Based on this dissociation, the illusion of two structural subjects arises (Guilfoyle et al 1992). In contrast, we propose that Austronesian languages regularly exhibit a single surface subject, but that Dixon's subjecthood diagnostics might track different things: control and reflexivization target the highest argument in VoiceP, the position we link to subjecthood; imperatives can build on agentivity alone or be affected by independent licensing conditions, just like unmarked case, (Φ-)agreement and A-movement can be dissociated from subjects across languages (e.g. quirky subjects, A-scrambling). Crucially, only a comparative perspective reveals that the correlation of these properties might be epiphenomenal, and that only a subset reliably tracks subjecthood.

• **Typological extensions:** Austronesian is subsumed to a larger cross-linguistic pattern of nominal licensing and (re-)mapping of grammatical roles, intertwined with info-structure, attested e.g. in discourse-configurational languages (Miyagawa 2010), the Algonquian inverse (Oxford 2023) and Bantu inversion (van der Wal 2022).